



MINISTRY IN THE SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

Pastoral
Care
in the Small
Membership
Church

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Abingdon Press

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ISBN: 978-0-687-34326-3

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CHAPTER 1

An Opportunity for Excellence

The Christian faith is about love. It is about God's love for us. It is about God loving us into living in love. It is the mission of the church to lead people and communities into life-shaping relationships with God, who loves us. That should be the subject of the proclamation and of the teaching of the church. But the best way to lead people into a life-shaping relationship with God is to invite them into a community in which God's love is embodied in the relationships among people. Bringing people into a community of caring believers and into relationship with a caring pastor can enable people to experience God's love in ways that can make a big difference in their lives.

Small membership churches have a real advantage when it comes to incorporating people into a fellowship in which they are known as persons and in which their personal needs are met. Small churches and their pastors should not fail to make the most of this ministry. They can excel in it. It can be the key to effectiveness in all the other ministries of the church.

In recent years, there has been a kind of preoccupation in church circles with large membership churches and megachurches, as if those kinds of congregations were considered the norm by which all churches are to be measured. It is true that a large percentage of the people who are now active in churches are served by large membership churches in urban centers. These churches have their unique mission and needs and problems and possibilities. But so do small membership churches.

The very demographic distribution of people in America, and in other places too, determines that, if everyone is to be served by the church, many will have to be served by churches with an average attendance of fewer than one hundred. Many of these are vital, active congregations in small towns or rural areas where there are just not enough people to make up a large church. Many of these churches will be served by part-time pastors or by "circuit-riding" pastors who serve more than one congregation. Some of these may be declining churches, which, for reasons beyond anyone's control, are smaller than they once were. These churches face some unique challenges.

It should be obvious that small membership churches play a needed and

important role in the total mission of the church. The network of small membership churches that presently exists reaches into almost every town and community, even the most remote. When I drive across the country and see church signs with the symbol of my denomination on them in every little town and in some places that are not towns, I get really excited about the possibility that distribution of churches represents. Those churches, together with similar churches of sister denominations, have tremendous potential for meeting human needs, affecting the quality of life, and shaping the way of life in America and in many other places. It is not hard to see what role they can play in fulfilling the commission that Jesus gave to his disciples at the time of his ascension: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Most pastors will spend some time, if not their whole careers, serving small membership churches. While you are the pastor of a small membership church, you will be wise to give that church your best. "Bloom where you are planted." Your own integrity as a person and your need for meaning in your life should require that. If you spend your whole life serving small membership churches and doing it well, yours will have been a life well spent. But even if you are destined to eventually serve large membership churches, the insights and experience you will gain while serving small membership churches will be priceless training to prepare you for leadership in larger congregations.

There is a notion rattling around in church circles now that every church ought to imitate all the things that mega-churches do. The assumption is made that doing those things will make any church grow. I have known some pastors who have gone off to conferences on church growth and come home believing that, since the senior pastors of mega-churches do not do much pastoral visitation, they shouldn't do visitation either. (Somehow they must have missed hearing how much energy effective large church pastors invest in seeing that their churches provide the kind of caring relatedness that comes naturally to small membership churches.)

Small membership churches are different from large churches in ways other than size. They are a different kind of organism. They live differently. They grow differently. Committed and creative pastors will seek ways of doing ministry that are appropriate and effective in their own church and

community situations. Church growth can come to small churches in the same way that it should come to all churches, through people being led into life-shaping relationships with God, who loves us all.

Most laypeople in small membership churches want to have a personal relationship with their pastor. They want to know that their pastor knows them and cares about them and can be called on to minister to them. Soon after I arrived at my first pastoral appointment, one of the older church members, who wanted to be helpful, sought me out and said to me, "Folks up here like for the pastor to come around." He was letting me know that the church members would expect their pastor to initiate relationships with the people, to be a part of the community, and to be sensitive and responsive to the human and spiritual needs of the people. A pastor who opts out of that ministerial function may eventually hear the people saying, "Depart from me, you unfaithful and useless pastor, for I was in the hospital and you did not visit me; I was in grief and you did not comfort me; I was going through a bad time in my life but you did not seem to care about me."

Of course, the pastor should not be the only person in a congregation who is involved in caring ministries. The whole congregation should be a caring community. Being small gives a congregation a unique opportunity to be one, but small size alone will not make a church into a caring fellowship. That will take an intentional commitment on the part of the people. Each congregation should work at building up its network of caring relationships and its caring outreach to others. In that way, it can develop the ministry of its members and also meet the needs of its community.

There are usually some laymembers in every church who just naturally gravitate toward doing the work of caring ministry. But most churches will need for their pastors to give leadership in developing these ministries. They will need for the pastor to prepare people to respond to needs by providing both training and example. They will need for the pastor to know where the needs are and to help caring people to get in touch with the people who have those needs. They will need for the pastor to mobilize a comprehensive response to human needs. All these things are entirely possible for small membership churches and their pastors—and they will provide a rich and satisfying experience in ministry.

This book is based on three convictions: first, that small membership churches have an important role to play in the total mission of the church universal; second, that small membership churches have some unique and exciting possibilities for ministry that ought to be maximized; and third, that every pastoral assignment is important and deserves the very best, most faithful, and most creative service that its pastor can give it. Let's explore the possibilities.

CHAPTER 2

Moving into Relationship

The first step in offering pastoral care is moving into relationship with others. You must take the initiative in offering a special kind of friendship. You must get to know others, allow yourself to be known by others, and offer to become involved with others in certain significant ways. In a small membership church, you can and should offer that kind of relatedness to every member of the congregation and also to as many other people as possible in the community that the congregation serves.

This will come easily for some who are naturally gregarious and outgoing people. They will find it natural to reach out and to relate to others. But some are, by inclination, more private people who find it difficult to relate to others. Whether it is easy or difficult for you, moving into relationship with others is essential for effective pastoral care. You will have to work at that very intentionally.

There are certain external things you can do, certain motions you can go through, to dramatize your willingness to relate and to actually give relationships an opportunity to develop. Get out of the study one or two mornings a week and visit around the town square—if you live in a town with a square. Attend school carnivals and high school football games, whether or not you have children, and talk to as many people as you can. Attend community events, even fund-raisers at the other churches. Frequent the places where people go for coffee and speak to everyone

whose eyes meet yours. When you are at a meeting or a community event, work your way around the gathering and speak to as many people as you can. You take the initiative. Don't wait for others to come and introduce themselves to you. Eventually, a trip to the grocery store will become a time for pastoral visitation. Later, I will suggest a systematic visitation of the whole congregation. These are all effective ways of announcing that you want to get to know people and of giving it a chance to happen.

These external actions can be helpful. But the kind of moving into relationship that really needs to occur is something that happens inside of you. It is something inside of you that allows something to happen inside of others so that significant interactions can take place between you. It starts with being genuinely interested in the people whom you serve, getting to know them, getting to like them and to trust them as much as you can, getting to really care about what is going on in their lives. It then moves on to making an offer of a particular kind of friendship.

If you happen to be a naturally withdrawn and private person, you may have to push yourself out of your "comfort zone" to do this. But less outgoing people are not at a complete disadvantage. In fact, some naturally outgoing people may tend to form only superficial relationships. Some may be so aggressive that they tend to fill up the space in a relationship with themselves and not leave room for the other. If you intentionally open yourself to others but do not come on too strong, you may actually offer a kind of relationship with which many will be more comfortable.

What is needed is a relationship in which you as pastor offer to share your life with others and invite others to share their lives too. The relationship must make space for the other. It must make space for the other as the other actually is. Acceptance is very important. But you must not try to force a relationship upon another. In a rural community, you may have to deal with many others who are naturally private people. They will resist anything they regard as an intrusion. But if an offer of friendship is made, and if they can learn to trust the one who makes it, the offer will be appreciated and may eventually be accepted.

The pastor must take the initiative in offering relatedness and then wait for the other to respond. The waiting must include permission to reject the offer of friendship as well as permission to accept it. It should also include willingness to keep the offer open until the other is ready to enter into it.

Offering relatedness like this involves a certain amount of risk and vulnerability. That is an inevitable part of a significant relationship. There will always be those who will abuse an offer of friendship either to turn you into an errand boy or to involve you in some personal agenda that may not really be good. It will be necessary to establish certain boundaries to prevent that kind of abuse of the relationship. But the vulnerability that goes with caring, the risk of having to hurt with others and the risk of being hurt by others, is part of the price a person pays for getting significantly involved. God pays that price for getting involved with us. We must be willing to pay that price if we are to participate in the work that God is doing.

One of the greatest barriers that some of us have to overcome is the barrier of our own inner insecurity. That is a very subtle thing. You may not fully understand it yourself. You will probably not need to go through psychoanalysis to try to understand it. You would be better advised to spend time in those personal relationships and spiritual disciplines through which you can experience God's affirmation of yourself. Then you will need to intentionally push past your resistance to move out into relationship even if that moving out is initially uncomfortable. If your offer of relationship is accepted and returned, at least some of the time, you may find that you are able to move out of yourself more freely.

Remember that it is OK to be a little anxious. It is a healthy thing to know your limitations. Remember that all you can do is to give the best that you have to offer. Do that and trust that God will use your efforts to accomplish good things. We will eventually talk about how to recognize situations in which you are up against something that is beyond your capabilities and how to make a referral to someone who has the skills needed to deal with it. Remember that most of the people in your congregation and many of the people in the wider community actually want a relationship with the pastor. They will appreciate your offer of friendship.

Building personal relationships can prepare the way for pastoral counseling and other kinds of pastoral care. In a small membership congregation, it can also position the pastor to work effectively in other areas of pastoral work such as leadership and preaching (especially sermons that are relevant to people's needs and those dealing with those tough social and moral issues). It would be hard to overestimate the importance of building pastoral relationships in small membership churches.

Beginning ministers, especially young ones, are often eager to know what authority they have to make changes and to decide what will be done in the parish. That really is not the way things work in a church of any size, especially in a small church. Effective pastors lead. They do not command. You will need to work with people and to lead them into making needed changes and undertaking needed ministries. That kind of leadership becomes possible when people know and trust you and believe that you really want what is best for them and for their church. Much of that leading takes place not in the business meetings and not from the pulpit, but in the personal conversations that take place before the meetings. In those settings, the pastor is able to share ideas and to let people think about them and warm up to them. In those situations, you can also discipline your own thinking by listening to the feedback from church members and considering whether your ideas are really right for the church and whether the congregation is ready for them. In a small membership church, effective leadership grows out of effective pastoral relationships.

Leadership through change can be really crucial for many churches. Many small membership churches need to make important changes in their ways of doing things in order to survive and to minister effectively in a changing world. Most small membership churches resist change. Only a pastor who has won the trust of the congregation through building good pastoral relationships will have any chance to lead the churches through the needed changes.

Pastoral relationships also prepare the way for prophetic ministries. In every generation, there are some big issues that God wants preachers to talk about even though the congregations don't want to hear about them.

That is part of the way God works through the church to change the world. I will always remember the 1960s when the Civil Rights movement was going on. Many of us felt that God was calling us to speak out on issues of justice and, if possible, to lead the churches into some loving action. Many churches *really* did not want to hear that. That one issue kept me in hot water for the first third of my ministry. Those of us who were able to speak or act on that issue and survive in our pastorates were the ones who had built good pastoral relationships with our people. We had learned to speak to them as to people God loves and wants to lead into a better life. We did not treat them like enemies of justice and condemn them. And those of us who had served the people by caring for them when they were sick and being their friend when they needed a friend, had built up a certain amount of "credit" with our congregations. That made them willing to tolerate a few ideas they didn't like and even to begin to think about them. God is not yet through trying to change the world. Prophetic ministry is still part of the pastor's mission. And effective pastoral relationships can help facilitate that.

But, apart from all that, building the kinds of relationships I have been describing can, in and of itself, carry much of the freight of Christian ministry. Such relationships communicate better than words ever could the forgiving, accepting, healing, and enabling love of God. Remember, that is what the work of the church is all about.

As you move into relatedness, you will become more and more comfortable in it. Relationships will grow and become an affirmation of your pastoral role. Your confidence in your ability to share significant pastoral relationships will grow.

Of course, you may find yourself up against some really bad situations in the lives of some people or in the life of some congregation that will prevent you from moving into significant pastoral relationships. These bad situations can come in an awesome variety of shapes. Remember that, if things don't work out, it is not always your fault. It is your responsibility to take the initiative and to make the offer. Do your best to make things better. It may become necessary for you to move on and start over in a new parish.

If in time you discover that you are never going to be able to effectively move into caring relationships, you would be wise to seek the counsel of someone whose wisdom and experience you respect and consider whether you should rethink your calling to pastoral ministry. Being a minister without building caring relationships simply is not possible, especially in small membership churches.

Your offers of pastoral relatedness will probably be welcomed, and you and your congregation will probably move into a kind of sharing of life that you will both find richly rewarding.

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Small membership churches have a real advantage when it comes to incorporating people into a fellowship where they are known and where their needs are met. These churches and their pastors have an opportunity for excellence in this area, and should make the most of it. Good pastoral care can be the key to effectiveness in all the other ministries of the church.

From getting acquainted with your congregation, weddings and funerals, picking up on subtle cues in a conversation to not-so-subtle conflicts, Killen shares insights from years of ministry in a small membership church setting.

- ◆ Describes the basics of pastoral care in a small membership church setting
- ◆ Gives examples of typical mistakes a pastor might make in a small membership church setting and tips on how to avoid them
- ◆ Focuses on the unique opportunity small membership churches have to be caring communities