

Practical Helps for Smaller Churches—PEP

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Introduction

Many small rural churches leaders express a need for help in putting together the work of their church. They want to honor God with vital worship; they want to see the members grow spiritually; they want to reach the unchurched; and they want to see the community about them become a better place. Unfortunately, this is often not what happens.

The causes of this malady are many. Some are spiritual. Others are sociological. Some can not be resolved. Some will in time resolve themselves. Others can be addressed, now.

My purpose in this series of short articles is to offer guidance to leaders of smaller churches concerning how to go about doing the work of a church where resources are not plentiful. In writing about this topic I am drawing upon experience as a pastor, the leader of a regional association of smaller churches, and as the former director of the rural church office for the Southern Baptist convention. I truly believe that you can take these helps, use them, and see your church flourish. Since I am providing this material at no cost to you, I have no other motivation than to be of help. Whether or not I am will be for you to judge.

I perceive this to be something like a “shareware” project. I am going to do my best. As you use it improve it, expand it, correct it, look at related topics, and whatever else. I hope that this triggers a ever growing body of resources on our web site. I believe that there are thousands of creative folk serving in small churches. They are doing many, many good things. The electronic revolution provides us with the opportunity to share with one another. I see the possibility of the more exciting and dynamic days of ministry lying just before us.

What follows is a revision of materials that I prepared and gave to Southern Baptists a few years ago. I have refined them for a more general audience.

Among my guiding assumptions are the following:

- the work of a small church should be a locally arrived at mix of programs, events, and projects.
- often programs created and distributed from a denominational office require more resources than a small church can muster, because those who prepare the material do not have current experience with small church life..
- since the membership of a small church is usually stable, and since programs tend to be repetitious, small churches may lose interest in the content of their programs.
- really, events and projects are what many small churches do best.
- using an event or project may be the most efficient and effective way for a church to address some of the work it needs to do.
- care must be exercised to see that the events and projects address the basic functions (or tasks) of a church..
- one can shape projects and events to address multiple functions.
- good events and projects can raise the morale of a small church.
- good events and projects can make a small church attractive to the unchurched.

- the leadership of a church and select a set of programs, events and projects that will enable it to be faithful to its calling and effective in its setting.

What follows will build upon these assumptions and will apply them in practical ways to the life and work of smaller churches. Examine them. Do they fit your experience in smaller churches? Do they pass muster with your theology and ecclesiology? Maybe you require some definitions before you can express an opinion I will move to address that matter now.

Looking at PEP

The activities of most churches can be categorized with the acrostic PEP—programs, events and projects. Some come prepackaged from a denominational agency or a parachurch group. Others are a part of the history and heritage of the congregations. Others are a response to an opportunity, vision, or need.

The most common *program* of churches is Sunday School. Most order quarterlies from some press, often one operated by their denomination. They elect someone and charge them with the responsibility of organizing and maintaining this program. They promote participation. Similarly many churches have on-going programs for missions education, spiritual growth, evangelism or outreach, and worship. During much of the twentieth century the churches of a particular denomination from one end of the continent to the other would offer essentially the same set of program organization supported by a standard set of materials for study or worship, organizational structure, and prescribed procedures. The guiding concept was that one might attend a church of a particular faith family in Charleston, Chicago, Casper, or Capistrano and find them all doing pretty much the same thing. This was the product of Industrial Age thinking. Some have referred to it as McChurch. Denominational agencies sent forth representatives to promote the standard set of programs. The message was that loyal and effective churches do the programs of the denomination in the approved fashion.

Alas, in time many smaller churches found that they did not have the resources and energy to do all of the programs in the way they were supposed to be done. (Interestingly, many of the very large congregations also dropped the standard programs and relied on their own creativity. They complained that the programs as resourced by the denomination were too restrictive.) Some programs and their organizational support died. This was a problem for the denomination in that it lost customers for its publications. It was a problem for many smaller churches because the denomination had wisely created the programs with the purpose that they would enable the churches to address the basic tasks or functions of a church. If the program that supported a task was no longer present in the life of a church, there was the danger that an important function or task would be neglected. For example, if the program that was designed to develop discipleship and spiritual growth became ineffective and died, then there was a danger that that task of a church might not be well addressed.

Events is the middle word indicated by our acrostic. Events are those special times in the life of the church family. Examples include homecoming, revival, fifth Sunday hymn sing, Vacation Bible School, and Christmas exercises. Events are those things that are done regularly,

often annually, which give spice to the life of the congregation. We look forward to them. We enjoy them. Then, we pack them up until their time comes again. Typically, the event is designed to serve one or more of the basic tasks of a church. One of the ideas that I want to suggest to smaller church leaders is that consideration be given to using events as a substitute for a program if the program is not doable in one's church. Further, often an event can deal with a need more effectively than a program. For example, in working with the youth of a church, or a cluster of churches, a special event focused on Christian sexuality can be a more effective device than dealing with the subject piecemeal in a weekly youth meeting. And as I will stress later, programs and events can support and feed one another.

Projects is the referent for the last letter in the PEP acronym. I am using project here to refer to a one-time event. Often, it addresses a special need. The need is met. The project is over. In time a similar need may present itself, and a similar project may be developed. Projects are more likely driven by need than by calendar. For example, the men of my church recently constructed a ramp for a woman in the church who is confined to a wheel chair. They enjoyed the project. If a similar need arises, it will not be hard to get that crew back together. There are times, of course, when a project becomes an annual event or even a program of a church. A project to have a ministry booth at the county fair could easily become an annual event. Or a project to help a needy person, might lead to the establishment of a food pantry or a clothing distribution program by a church.

With the PEP definitions before us, let me now suggest a very basic principle of small church work –*each congregation needs to put together the set of Programs, Events, and Projects that will enable it to be the Body of Christ in its location, among the people there, in keeping with its understanding of Scripture and the traditions of its faith family.*

As recently as 10 years ago, this was a radical idea for denominational leadership. They believed that there was “one best way” of doing church. They had discovered it. They had packaged it. All the local church needed to do was to order the material, take the training, work hard and good things would happen. Alas, when they did not, the blame was put on the pastor and church leaders. They were not competent. They did not follow directions. They were lazy. (Actually, because this kind of standardization thinking dominated American Protestantism for most of the Twentieth Century, it is still strong out there.)

What I am proposing is a process that you can use to assemble a set of programs, events and projects that will fit you, your church, its heritage, and its context. It will be guided primarily by the basic normative functions or tasks of a church.

What Does a Church Need to be Doing?

To be the Body of Christ, or an expression of His body, a congregation needs to focus on several very basic tasks. Interestingly the various denominational traditions with which I am familiar are pretty much in agreement about what these are. Worship, proclamation, nurture, ministry, fellowship and mission comprise the basic list. I will work with this list here. You may need to modify it some to fit your tradition.

At this point it is crucial for us to realize that there must be correlation of the basic tasks and the PEP expressions in your church. For example, the Sunday School program needs to intentionally address most, if not all, of the tasks. Think about a class in your Sunday School.

Certainly, nurture is the primary task, but prayers in the class addresses worship. Much of the teaching involves witness, particularly if there are unchurched persons attending the class. The class should be a unit of fellowship and often will pursue a ministry task. Finally, mission may be addressed by a project of the class, offerings taken by the class, sponsorship of a person going off on a mission, or even special units of study. Similar analyses might be made of other programs in a church. As a leader you have the responsibility of keeping PEP and functions interrelated.

Beyond this, let me argue that there are times in the life of a church and/or factors in its ministry context which may indicate a need to focus more on one or two of the tasks of the church than upon others. For example, in my role as a kind of general pastor of 31 congregations, I often supply a pulpit for a month or so when a pastor leaves the church. If the church has been engaged in conflict, I will chose certain themes for worship and place great stress on worship. To my mind getting right with God needs to be a priority. It sets the stage for the members to get reconciled with one another. If there are some moral and ethical problems in the church, I will focus on teaching or nurture. If there are unchurched people all about, then proclamation will be my focus.

In the next two articles I will present a model and method for integrating task and event and tasks and project. After that I will present a 10 step plan for putting an event or project together. Following that I will have an article related to visioning and planning in a church and finally I will look at some keys to growing a church.

So, let me conclude this article by reiterating the point that a church does its work with a sent of Programs, Events and Projects. This is good. These elements need to be correlated with about six basic tasks of the church In a small church where most folk are involved in most activities and not as many activities are possible, care should be exercised to have PEP elements serve multiple tasks of the church Leaders of small churches should very strategically select and develop a set of Programs, Events and Projects that fit the congregation, its gifts, its needs and its context.