

FOR SMALLER-MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES

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Recently, I was privileged to attend a training offered by Lyle Schaller on doing consultations with congregations. What follows is my effort to summarize the points that he made as applied to smaller-membership churches.

I. Assumptions

- A. Work from a Biblical base (Our Church on Mission, Ephesians 4-6, Revelation 2-3)
- B. There is a place for smaller-membership churches in the life of the Christian movement
- C. Can be good/healthy
- D. The local church is the focus of Kingdom work.
- E. Not all churches need to be carbon copies of one another (no Golden Arches).
- F. Must focus on God's will for the congregation.
- G. The vision of the church must be widely shared and kept at the center.
- H. Functions of fixed forms do change.
- I. The central purpose of a Baptist association is to support the expansion of God's Kingdom.

II. Tool Box

- A. Acquaintance with many different congregations
- B. In touch with one's own belief system
- C. Flexible/entrepreneurial in Kingdom development
- D. Knowledge of many resources
- E. Cheerleaders for victories
- F. Crash along the way
- G. Counselor in times of failure and disappointment
- H. Skilled in asking the right questions:
  - 1. What one thing would you like to see changed?
  - 2. Brag to me about this church, your pastor.
  - 3. Who do you know around here that is not in church?
  - 4. What do I need to know about this church?
  - 5. Who is your competition?
  - 6. Which person of the Trinity is mentioned most here?
  - 7. What does it cost per worshipper per Sunday to hold church here?
- I. Sees the big picture

III. Common issues for consultations

- A. Finding leadership
- B. Conflicts within a church
- C. Conflicts between churches
- D. Misconduct by leaders
- E. Relocation
- F. Merger/closing
- G. How to reach the lost
- H. How to organize the church
- I. How to administer the church
- J. Spiritual apathy
- K. Schedule of events
- L. Resources
- M. Starting a new congregation
- N. Planning/finishing a new facility

- O. Redefining the bounds of the “field”
- P. Expectations for the leaders
- Q. Identifying the competition
- R. Leadership development

## SOME LEARNINGS FROM SCHALLER RELATED TO SMALL CHURCHES

### LEARNINGS

- More than one church is needed to reach most places/people.
- Congregations compete (as well as cooperate).
- Quality is more significant in gaining members than is label.
- Not all churches can/will grow.
- Some can change.
- Small is normative.
- Not a problem to participants.
- Not a miniature large church.
- Have more choices than they imagine.
- Bivocational is the best way.

NOTE: It costs \$60,000 to \$100,000 to operate a single-staff, “fully-supported” congregation per year. For example, for a \$78,000 budget, a church would need \$1,500 per Sunday. This would be an average of \$30.00 for 50 worshippers, \$20.00 for 75 worshippers, or \$15.00 for 100. What amount of family income is required to support, equally, a small church? What can a small church do to reach its budget? Why does Schaller see bivocationalism as a realistic possibility for smaller membership churches? Does it seem that this substantiates the contention that church is a middle-class activity? Is this a barrier for having churches in poor communities and for reaching poor people?

### ISSUES RELATED TO SMALLER-MEMBERSHIP CHURCH LIFE

- Money
- Finding a pastor
- Music
- Guilt about being small
- Endemic conflict
- Having vision
- Quality worship
- Assimilation of new folk
- Loving the neighbor
- Competition with mega/exciting church
- Appropriate cooperation with others
- Area/neighborhood niche
- Identifying tomorrow’s constituency
- People groups
- First and second congregations
- Facilities (relocation)
- Select person of the Trinity

- Events/programs
- 501C—ministry
- Team approach

Urban small churches often have a life window of about 50 years. But rural small churches may live on for centuries.

For a full discussion of these topics by Lyle Schaller, read *The Small Membership Church*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. Also, the David Ray book, *The Big Small Church Book*, Pilgrim Press, 1993, is well done.

#### MARKS OF A GOOD SMALLER-MEMBERSHIP CHURCH

Not too long ago, I asked about 50 associational missionaries to help general a list of qualities that a good smaller-membership church should present. What we came up with is listed below. Take a look and see what you think. Add. Question. Delete.

- Loving
- Positive attitude
- Cooperative
- Involved laity
- Missionary
- Evangelistic
- Friendly
- Visionary/planning
- Doing ministry
- Project activity
- Stewardship
- Vital fellowship
- Good reputation
- Sound doctrine
- Loyalty to the denomination
- Discipling members
- Good Bible study
- Meaningful worship
- Appropriate growth