

## **THE SMALLER CHURCH AND ITS "ANNUAL EVENT"**

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As the first fingers of light began to streak the eastern sky, from the vantage point of the top of the cemetery hill in the Shady Grove community, one could observe a steady stream of automobiles and farm trucks coming from both directions along state route 37. Soon the parking lot was filled and overflowed. Little knots of people carefully made their way to the brow of the hill, visiting in hushed tones. Soon, the orange orb of the sun broke from behind the Smoky Mountains, turning the lake below into a shimmering sea.

Next, the mixed quartet from the church, well-practiced, struck up a medley of hymns that celebrated the resurrection of the Lord. As the guest minister from a large city congregation spoke of our hope of eternal life and reunion in Heaven, minds were filled with thoughts of mothers, fathers, husbands, children, and friends whose bodies lay beneath this sod.

A little later friends gathered around long tables in the church basement. As they devoured mounds of scrambled eggs, country ham, and home-made biscuits, they brought one another up-to-date on their recent activities and relived the events, great and small, they had shared in the past. By 8:30 the crowd was gone. Two hundred and twenty-seven had been fed. As she cleaned up the kitchen, Bessie Lou, who had once again chaired this event, felt alternately tired and extremely happy. At 11:00, pastor Churchwell mounted the pulpit and looked out at a crowd of a little less than 50 persons. Where had all the people gone?

Pastors at Burr's Branch often joked about the Holy Spirit only coming to that church during the second week in August. Wise ones realized there as a very logical reason for holding the annual revival at that time—the second cutting of hay was in, crops were laid by, and a farm community had some free time. Once Harvey, the county court Judge, complained about the costs of these meetings, questioning their usefulness. But the deacons, Pacey, Lefty, Gummy and Jim—set him straight. As long as anyone could remember, and Burr's Branch was over 100-years-old then, revival was held the second week in August.

The revivals there took on elements of a "homecoming" or reunion. Family and former members who had moved away to Kansas City or St. Joseph planned to "be back home" during the second week in August. Grandparents insisted that their grandchildren come for a visit during the second week in August. No church within a 10-15 mile radius planned a competing event the second week in August. Rather they came with special music at least one night. And to the minds of most, nothing in this world could compare with the "carry in" dinner on the final Sunday of the meeting. Usually, a baptizing was a part of the celebration of that afternoon.

In the weeks before the second week in August, the church house was painted,

polished and pampered. Harvey had the county crew grade the road, put some gravel on the parking lot, and clean out the bar ditches and fence rows. And even he has been reported to say to Florence, as they rocked in their swing on the front porch the third Sunday night in August, "I believe the Holy Spirit did come to Burr's Branch again this year."

Edith and Herman have run the Oak Grove store for 50 years now. They have no children of their own. But they have parented the children of the community. Each Sunday they gather up children in a van to bring to church. Through the years they planned picnics, day camps, hayrides and other outings for the children in Oak Grove. They and the children have even organized a mission Sunday School in a campground near the church.

But the event which is most important to them is the annual Christmas program. It is held on Christmas Eve. All during the month before, the children learn their parts and practice songs and skits. Mothers make costumes.

Large amounts of fruit, candy and nuts are secured and sacked for distribution at the program. Edith and Herman arrange for the church to give at least one nice gift to each participating child. For some, this will be their nicest gift. Those who grew up in that community always remember Oak Grove church, the excitement of Christmas at the church, and what they learned as they celebrated the birth of God's Son.

Small church specialist, Carl Dudley, in *Making Small Churches Effective*, called our attention to the importance of "annual events" in the life of many smaller congregations. He contrasts these with the ongoing week-by-week program that denominational agencies develop and promote. He states that smaller congregations do their work, not so much with programs, as with events and projects. Those who have analyzed the effectiveness of the Four-Star Rural Church Program of Southern Baptists in the late 1950s have concluded that much of its success stemmed from the fact that it encouraged smaller churches to do this work through annual events and special projects.

Unfortunately, some of us who grew up in larger "programmatic" congregations find ourselves in our early pastorates in smaller "event/project" congregations. So we try to get the 40 folks at Burr's Branch to do it like we did it at the "big" church. We may even try to "kill" their annual events so this energy can be channeled into ongoing programs. Usually, we get frustrated, ignored or fired for these efforts. And little of any significant changes occur.

So, how about "working smart?"

1. Identify your annual events—special celebration of holidays, homecomings and decorations, revival, Vacation Bible School, workdays and so forth.
2. Affirm the annual events. Most small churches "feel good" about the success of their annual events. The children come home. The friends from the other churches visit and enjoy themselves. The congregation is bonded through the process of

working together. This is important. A church that doesn't have a healthy self-image will not be an attraction to others.

3. Become involved as much as possible. Most annual events are lay-owned and operated. You shouldn't replace this leadership. Here you can demonstrate your willingness to be a good follower. By doing this, you will find some members more ready to accept your leadership in other areas.

4. Analyze the annual events in terms of the basic functions and tasks of the church—worship, spiritual growth, witness, ministry, fellowship—and the like. Consider how the events can either achieve or undergird such functions. By holding up these basic functions before the event leaders, call them to keep the event "kingdom oriented" in its focus.

5. Move toward intentionality. Smaller churches are notorious for failing to do even annual, let alone long-range, planning. Unfortunately, some of us "town boys" have tried to lay on some of these congregations elaborate processes prepared for larger congregations. And this cure only made the malady worse.

Recently, I have come across some bright small church pastors who have successfully taken an alternate approach. One has gotten from the leaders of the several annual events in his congregation lists of resources and needs, and plans for processes in promoting, preparing for and conducting each annual event. By doing this, he has formalized the planning for each of the annual events. This has become the substance of an initial annual calendar for the church. Added to it was the ongoing program of the church and associational and state convention dates.

In turn he has used the sentiment attached to the annual event of Decoration Day/Homecoming to initiate some long-range planning for maintenance and improvement of the church and the cemetery. It has become a part of the goal of that congregation to have some significant improvements to share with those who come to the annual event.

Another perceptive rural pastor has used the attachment to the revival as an annual event to get a census taken, to initiate witness training and to have a seasonal visitation program. (Note, it remains a seasonal and not a regular program of the church. He has accommodated himself to the rhythm of his congregation.)

In summary, many of us need to come to realize that the smaller church is truly different. It is not just waiting for some latter-day Moses to lead it into "big" church status. Annual events are very important to its life and sense of self. The wise pastor affirms these events. He keeps them on target. And he uses their strength as a way of addressing other important needs in the life of the churches.