

STRATEGIES TO MOVE THE SMALL CHURCH FORWARD

PURPOSE

Participants will learn the characteristics of the small church and develop strategies around one or more of these characteristics to further ministry in their churches.

TIME FRAME: 2 hours with a 10-minute break

BASIC WORKSHOP OUTLINE

I Introduction (*15 minutes*)

II Levers for Change in the Small Church: Two Mini-Cases (*40 minutes*)

Break (*10 minutes*)

III Developing a Strategy (*50 minutes*)

IV Closing (*5 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Arrange for drinks and snacks for the break
- Gather newsprint, markers, and tape
- Photocopy Handouts A, B, C, and D for participants
- Prepare process poster for III: Developing a Strategy

I Introduction (*15 minutes*)

Welcome the participants, introduce yourself, and share your background and interest in small church ministry. As you introduce yourself and the workshop, modeling relationship is important to reinforce the teaching that in small churches personal relationships are more important than content and ideas.

Explain where the facilities are and review the outline of the workshop. Encourage the participants to take breaks as needed and mention that there will be a 10-minute beverage break about half-way through.

Ask the participants to introduce themselves, say a little about their roles in their churches, and identify their favorite fruit or vegetable that begins with the letter “P.”

Offer a brief devotion using Handout A or a devotion of your own.

II Levers for Change in the Small Church: Two Mini-Cases (40 minutes)

If you have more than nine participants, break into groups of around five using their identified vegetables to form groups, such as the Pineapples, the Pumpkins, the Parsnips, and the Picnic Basket. Mixing people from different churches will allow for 1) a sense of “we’re not in this alone,” 2) new ideas to surface, and 3) personal networking.

Distribute Handout B and explain that certain actions and attitudes enhance progress in a church, while others block progress. Invite the participants to read through the case studies and respond to the questions. Provide newsprint, tape, and markers and ask that each group select a scribe to record their ideas.

After about 10 minutes, invite each group to share their responses. Ask for two volunteers to serve as scribes to create a compiled list.

Distribute Handout C and review it together. Ask each group to choose (or assign each group) one of the four principles. Ask groups to prepare a presentation that illustrates that characteristic at work in introducing change. Encourage them to be creative—to plan a skit, compose a song, or write a story—for the presentations. Allow about 10 minutes to work, then invite each group to share their presentations, encouraging applause after each.

BREAK (10 minutes)

Remind the participants where the facilities are and direct them to the drinks and snacks. Give a time for return and ask them to reassemble after the break into groups according to the roles they play in their churches.

Use the break time to label areas of the room as “C.E. board member,” “church officer,” “pastor,” “Sunday School teacher,” and so on. As an alternative, the groups can be formed according to their church if there are several churches represented, or you can return to the same “vegetable groups,” if those worked well.

III Developing a Strategy (50 minutes)

Once the participants have formed their groups, invite them to follow this process as presented on a poster, chalkboard, or overhead.

- 1) Identify an issue for discussion:
 - either a FRONT-BURNER issue—one you are already concerned about
 - or
 - a NEED-RESPONSE issue—one that matches a community need with a church strength

[Explain that the strategy need not be painstakingly elaborate or specific, but it should be reflect a commitment to move your congregation toward the desired quality. For example, if the issue is to revitalize the worship service, they may want to plan a first step, such as hosting a dinner (habit) and sharing time during which people talk about special worship services they've enjoyed (past) and individuals who have gifts that might enhance worship (persons).]

- 2) Develop a strategy to address the selected issue, focusing on one or more of the principles of change in small churches.
- 3) After the strategy is spelled out, address these questions:
 - What are the weaknesses in the strategy? Can this be addressed positively?
 - Who might feel like they “lost” if your strategy succeeds?
 - How might you mitigate that “lost” person’s feeling like a “loser,” without caving in to emotional blackmail? For example, in what other area of the church’s life might the person feel like a “winner”?
 - What needs to be done over time to help the desired outcomes become new habits in the life of the church?
 - Are there additional ways to support this strategy?
- 4) Develop a prayer to share in support of your efforts.

Reconvene and share learnings, reactions, resolves, and surprises from each small group. Covenant to pray for each other and invite the groups to share the prayers they created. Distribute Handout D, “For Further Study.”

IV Closing (5 minutes)

Read Hebrews 12:1-2 and close with a prayer. Consider using the Inside-Out Circle as follows:

Ask all to form a circle facing inward, to cross arms, then join hands. Share a benediction that begins with thanksgiving for this group and the time together. Move to prayer for those in the world and for the future, and ask the participants to raise their arms and turn to form a large, outward facing circle.

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Handout A

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:1-2,

NIV

While becoming a disciple of Christ is a conviction of our innermost being, following him is not a private matter. Hebrews 12 suggests that how we follow Christ is a matter of concern to a great crowd who is watching, cheering us on when we are faithful, and praying for our weaknesses and failures. Who are these people who are rooting and pulling for us?

- They are the prophets and people of Israel in whose faithfulness lies the roots of our Christian faith.
- They are the earliest followers of Jesus who risked their families, livelihood, and very lives to live out the good news of God's love.
- They are the multitude of Christians down through the ages who through word and deed have offered their lives as the building blocks of God's Kingdom.

The witnesses eagerly await the day of completion, which depends on our continued faithfulness.

Prayer:

It is not just me, is it, Lord?

It is not just us alone, is it?

We might be a tiny backwater of a church, but we are still part of mighty, rushing river. Standing on the shoulders of the prophets, the apostles, and the martyrs, we catch a glimpse of what lies ahead for your people.

You have been busy throughout history. The church is called to be the embodiment of your love.

You have a plan and a purpose—a goal and a destination—that you will bring it to fruition.

The lives of the prophets, the labor of the apostles, the sacrifices of the martyrs have blazed the trail. You will not lead us—and them—to a dead end!

Give us eyes to see ourselves and our congregations in the perspective of your history, and may we live in the confidence that you will bring it all to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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Levers for Change in the Small Church: Two Mini-cases

Case #1: Dominic Desires Change

Dominic moved into town a year ago. He came from a large church in a wealthy suburb. Impressed by the love and welcome he and his family were shown, Dominic immediately jumped in at Bayberry Baptist. Worship, however, has begun to bother him. He finds it slow-moving, old fashioned, and quirky. Dominic desires a lively worship experience that is upbeat and high quality. So he presents the Deacons with a carefully constructed plan to replace the organ and organist with guitars and a worship team. “This is the wave of the future,” he argues. The Deacons like some of Dominic’s ideas, but are anxious about whether or not they can pull it off. “You are looking at this backward,” Dominic responds to their hesitance. “First, let’s shake off the old, and look with fresh eyes at what worship can be. Then we can acquire the needed skills.” Dominic agreed that some wouldn’t like the new style of worship, but he argued that progress mustn’t be held up by the unenlightened few. After more arguments, the chair asks for a vote

Case #2: So Does Scott

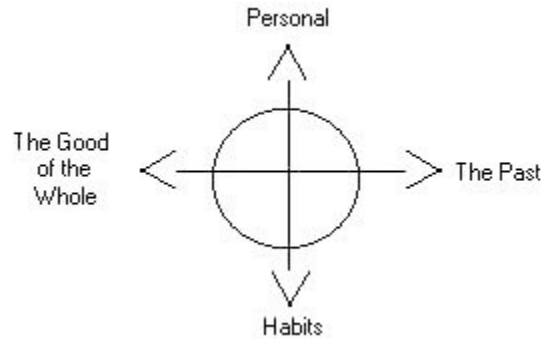
Scott joined Bayberry Baptist for the same reasons and about the same time as Dominic. He too desires a more lively worship service. However, Scott doesn’t present any plans, at least not right away. Instead he spends some time visiting with the pastor, the organist, and the lay reader. He finds out what they like and don’t like about worship. He discovers that the church’s current hymnal was introduced 25 years ago. He also learns that a number of church members had put on an instrumental concert a few years back and that many of the performers wanted to contribute more to the life of the congregation, but weren’t sure how. He further learns that a few decades back the youth group was responsible for one worship service a month. With Laity Sunday approaching, Scott offers to organize the worship, which turns out to be such a positive experience that

Discussion Questions

1. Which person is more likely to affect the desired change in his church? and Why?
2. What are the “moving” and “blocking” factors (consider all the players) in each situation?

Four Principles of Change in Small Churches

If we were to construct a compass to chart our way in the amazing world of the small church, it might look something like this:



The features of the world of the small church are personal considerations: Who is “fer” and “agin” it—whatever *it* may be? How will it affect those whom we love? Abstract and impersonal concerns don’t move small church folk much. Programs are only important as they impact their people. **Any strategy for change in the small church would be wise to give a priority to the people dimension.**

The view of the small church world is back, not forward. How things have been done is more important than how they could be done in the future. Traditions define who the church is. The very identity of the congregation is tied up in the stories of its past. **Any strategy for change in the small church, therefore, would be wise to locate its starting point in some aspect of its past.**

The tools of change in the small church are, paradoxically enough, the present repertoire of activities of the congregation. This does not mean that a church can only do what it is currently doing. It does mean that a new ministry will be more readily embraced if it utilizes skills already in place in the congregation. Small congregations are much more adept at applying what they know than at abstractly thinking about new activities. **Any strategy for change in the small church, therefore, would do well to build from the skills currently available.**

The goal of life in the small church is to preserve and enhance the well-being of the whole congregation. The little society which is the small church has its own integrity in the hearts of its members. Any change that appears to threaten that will be resisted. **Any strategy for change in the small church, therefore, would do well interpret its impact as building up the congregation’s life.**

To recap, any strategy for change in the small church:

1. would be wise to give a priority to the people dimension,
2. would be wise to locate its starting point in some aspect of its past,
3. would do well to build from the skills currently available, and
4. would do well interpret its impact as building up the congregation’s life.

For Further Study

- **Abingdon Press** <http://www.abingdonpress.com/> or 1-800-251-3320

Ministry in the Small Membership Church Series:

Pastoral Care in the Small Membership Church, James L. Killen, Jr. (2005)

Spiritual Leadership in the Small Membership Church, David Canada (2005)

- **The Alban Institute** <http://www.alban.org/> or 800-486-1318

Entering the World of the Small Church Revised and Expanded Edition, Anthony G. Pappas (2000)

Inside the Small Church, edited by Anthony G. Pappas (2002)

- **Discipleship Resources** <http://www.discipleshipresources.org/> or 1-800-972-0433

Vital Ministry in the Small Membership Church Series:

Biblical Virtues, John M. Freeman (2000)

Christian Education, Jack Gilbert, Myrtle Felkner (2001)

Mission, Betty C. Whitehurst (1999)

Sharing Stories, Shaping Community, Mike Mather (2002)

Healthy Esteem, Tony Pappas (2002)

- **Judson Press** <http://www.judsonpress.com> or 1-800-458-3766

All Churches Great and Small: 60 Ideas for Improving Your Church's Ministry, Kirk and Rose Farnsworth (2006)

12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders, David C. Laubach, Foreword by Thomas Bandy (2007)

Small Church in Action Series:

Activating Leadership in the Small Church: Clergy and Laity Working Together, Steve Burt (1988)

Christian Education in the Small Church, Donald L. Griggs and Judy McKay Walther (1988)

Developing Your Small Church's Potential, Carl S. Dudley and Douglas Alan Walrath (1988)

Making It Work: Effective Administration in the Small Church, Douglas Alan Walrath (1994)

- **The Pilgrim Press** <http://www.thepilgrimpress.com/> or 1-800-537-3394

Wonderful Worship in Smaller Churches, David Ray (2000)