

PRESSING ISSUES FACING EPC SMALL CHURCH LEADERS

I. Background

Small churches (those with under 200 in attendance) make up 61% of the EPC. Pastors of small churches face a unique set of issues and often express feelings of being “second class.” Small church leaders face a unique set of issues. Thirty-one (about 30%) ministers of EPC small churches took part in a survey process in March – May 2007 designed to determine a consensus of the most pressing issues facing small church leaders. The survey process was overseen by a planning group composed of EPC Assistant Stated Clerk Ed McCallum and EPC ministers Rob Buchanan, Ken Jones, Tommy Jordan, Fred Lian, and Rodger Woodworth. The five most pressing issues identified by EPC pastors of small churches were:

1. Church ministries: Members and visitors to small churches often expect a full range of programs. Small churches only have the resources to do a few, meaning visitors don't return and members get tired and/or discouraged. In isolated settings, support ministries (e.g., counseling, substance abuse programs) may be lacking. These ministries are difficult for a small church to sustain.
2. Lay leadership: A small church has a small pool of people from which to choose their leaders. The rule of 20% of the people doing 80% of the work seems to apply even in small churches. As a result, lay leaders in small churches tend to "recycle" and to over-commit which means that creativity may be lacking and that leaders are tired. There may not be enough leaders to handle all the activities the church has or wants to do, and existing leaders may be resistant to training. Pastors may not have not been trained to train leaders.
3. Resources: financial, human, and physical: A large proportion of small church's income is devoted to basic staff and building expenses, leaving little for programs and outreach. This, along with scarce human resources and sometimes a less than adequate meeting place can lead to a survival mentality, stretching the pastor financially, physically, and emotionally.
4. Assessment of Worth / Value: In a culture of "bigger is better" the small church and the pastor feel that they must be doing something wrong. There is a sense that the small church has less to offer their community and the kingdom of God and that the pastor is not being successful. Denominations and larger churches measure success with numbers, implying that smaller churches come up short.
5. Closed Fellowship: Close relationships in a small church are an asset that can become a detriment if turned inward. A sense of “family” can lead the small church to be a closed group, not wanting others to come in and thereby change their equilibrium. The “family” may not realize that they are closed. A closed fellowship has little interest in evangelism or mission to their community.