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The Small Church...

the New Testament example

How we perceive "the church" can shape our approach to both aspects of our commission as Christians. As the people of God we are to become nourished spiritually (to grow in grace) - and to disciple everyone. How can this best be achieved?

by James McBride

Most folk perceive the church as a building which is the center for few or many activities. The Biblical view, however, is that the church (Gk: *ecclesia*) is *the people* - those who have been called out by God. They are described in Scripture as *kleros* - a Greek word later misappropriated to designate a separate leadership class, the clergy.

Whichever view we take, most Christians believe that "big is beautiful". Success is measured by the numbers crowding into the meeting place Sabbath by Sabbath, or the number of converts added. An inner-city half dozen struggling to survive is seen as a failure and a great new crowded edifice as an indication of the blessing of God.

New Testament Pattern

Neither is necessarily so! For the small struggling community may represent where God is working in that area. The large enthusiastic church may be so far out of touch with the true faith that in God's eyes it is total failure! Indeed the small group may be the perfect template to accomplish our two aims - personal growth and mission.

[The term *assembly(ies)* is used here to avoid constant repetition of the words *small group(s)*. The word *church* designates the larger unitary congregation]

There is much evidence in the

Scriptures that "*small is beautiful*". It isn't for a couple of hundred years from the beginnings of Christianity that we see Christians meeting in buildings set apart for the purpose. Until then the pattern was for what in modern terms are called "house churches". They consisted of a dozen or so Christian families in a locality meeting in homes. The church in Rome is an example. with the leaders of several such assemblies listed (ch 16). This format is indicated by the frequent mention of the appointment of multiple leadership in a city. An example is Paul's convening of the elders of the city of Ephesus (Acts 20) - where the context implies more than two or three elders in the city. Or the instruction to Titus to appoint elders in every Cretan city.

This doesn't mean that there were few brethren - simply that no matter how numerous they chose to meet regularly in such assemblies. And as a reading of Roman 16 confirms, there were fraternal relations between the assemblies - they were all known to one another. Apostolic letters were sent for the benefit of all the Christians in a city - e.g. Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi. There was a network of inter-reacting assemblies.

Origins

But the core assemblies were the house groups. Where a small number met together in the name of Jesus he was there in their midst. This did not, of course, exclude larger meetings. There

would be frequent and regular occasions when several local assemblies would meet together as in the church festivals or other special events (e.g. Acts 6 and 15. I Corinthians 11:20). The house churches in a specific area (e.g. a city) were closely linked by ties of family, leadership, activities etc.

This concept emerged from the synagogue and from the judicial system of Israel which was the seed-bed of the Christian church. There could be several synagogues in a city (Acts 6:9. 9:2). Each was independently organized, but subscribed to common teachings and traditions of worship. And the pattern of tens, fifties etc introduced by Moses (Exodus 18:13-11) with divine approval (v.23) - and endorsed by Jesus (Mark 6:39-41) - was firmly entrenched among Israelites. Indeed synagogue and judicial system were intertwined.

Unitary Churches

There is, or at least can be, in large churches a dynamism generated by large numbers. It's encouraging to be "a part of something big". Activities denied an assembly become possible in a larger church - musical variety, wider fellowship, more extensive activities. But it has serious limitations.

A large church tends to establish cliques - brethren regularly fellowship with the same group, the more so the larger the church! There is a

The Small Church...

remoteness from other brethren and even from the pastor. Visitors can be overwhelmed or ignored. "Quiet" brethren are left out, side-lined from church activity with spiritual gifts and natural talent neglected.

Some larger churches recognize such limits and try to redress them. There are youth clubs, "wrinkly" clubs, singles clubs, sports clubs. Some even establish a network of "assemblies"!

Small Groups

Linked into a network of similar assemblies, a small group church has advantages over a unitary church. It is far from "second best".

With a dozen or so present one of the prime functions of our calling is enhanced - close relationships with one another. Enhanced is our ability to relate to and support the needs of our brethren. pray together in a personal way for one another, perhaps weep together. The Biblical instruction to "...one another" (e.g. Romans 12:10, 15:7 & 14; Galatians 5:13; 6:2; James 5:16 etc) can be applied most effectively in assemblies rather than in a large church.

In such an assembly spiritual gifts and natural talents of *all* present can flourish. A reading of the "gift chapters" (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, 14) suggests numerous brethren exercising a variety of gifts - a situation facilitated by many small assemblies rather than by the large church.

A further advantage is the face-to-face interaction in study of the Scriptures, and the opportunity to relate Biblical principles to the individual circumstances of those in the fellowship. There's a multi-way interaction that's impossible in a situation in which we sit merely listening to a one-way sermon - or even in a Bible Study where questions may be asked but the answer comes only

from the minister.

Outreach Ministry

The essence of an assembly is that it remains small in order to better accomplish its four-fold purpose worship, instruction, loving relationships, outreach. Its dynamics, motivated by the Holy Spirit, is for growth. The members seek ways to enlarge the assembly - to the point where another fellowship can be formed! Especially if meeting in a home, friends and neighbors can experience fellowship in a nonthreatening environment. As it enlarges, perhaps within three or four ears a new assembly is formed. Individual members can move to a more convenient geographical assembly. Key, gifted and experienced members may plant a new' fellowship elsewhere.

Those who attend are not necessarily baptized - but in general are *disciples*. That is, they are committed to following Jesus Christ but may still be in process of coming to commitment and baptism. The dynamics of such an assembly greatly assists the process: doubts can be directly addressed. specific doctrinal queries explained in a personal way etc.

Leadership

In any group situation - even in a small group - there must be a recognized and accepted leadership structure to keep the fellowship on course. It is erroneous to imagine any group, secular or religious, can progress without such a structure. Paul, for example, went to several towns and "appointed elders" in recently-formed fellowships (Acts 14:23). These were able local men, acceptable to the brethren in the fellowships, and who were qualified by character, understanding and disposition for leadership (See I Timothy 3, Titus 1). [The word *appoint* in Acts 14:23 implies the consent of those present. *Williams* translation has "helped them

select elders in each church".]

The work of God in a city or town was overseen by the collective leaders of the assemblies - the *presbytery*. By observing fraternal links with similar assemblies, accountability is maintained - for example in doctrine or in ethical matters. Yet there is the flexibility which allows for minor variation. Assembly leaders (elders) should, in a spirit of unity, regularly associate with one another. By this means doctrinal excess can be avoided. "Fathers in the faith" can in humility impart understanding and expertise to newer assemblies.

In addressing the elders from the Ephesian assemblies, Paul outlined their responsibility to shepherd those in their care and to guard them from false teachers (Acts 20:17ff). Without a godly and dedicated shepherd the sheep scatter! They scatter not only by leaving but also by accepting destructive heretical beliefs. The responsibility of the leadership in the church of God is awesome. All are responsible to the Head of the church, Jesus the Messiah!

Leadership training is integral to growth. For example Paul taught Timothy to train others at Ephesus so that they in turn could teach others (II Timothy 2:2). The intimacy of an assembly is an ideal training ground.

An Integrated Church

The church of God, then, is best served when its building blocks are seen as small self-contained units, and not an arbitrary sectioning of a large unitary church. As the units grow, so the church in a location will grow.

In the tradition of the Sabbatarian churches, there is everything to be gained by the establishment of assemblies as here described, with voluntary co-operation among them.

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