

LOAVES & FISHES

Some lessons hit home and remind us of the obvious. I recall when a friend loaned me an extra saw blade to complete a home project. When the blade became dull I said, "I'll pay the bill but would you mind dropping it off at the shop to be re-sharpened?" The request came easily as he is a particularly gracious fellow, and besides, since my pal is retired I added, "You have more time available." *Oops.* Gracious though he is, my benefactor noted, "Neil, I have exactly the same amount of time available to use as you do!"

Often, consideration of the ministries of small membership churches turns quickly to assessing available resources such as buildings, funds, the number who participate, and staff size. These all help shape the extent and style of ministries that may be undertaken. But beginning with assumptions about perceived scarcity of resources skews our appreciation of what is most important. The guiding principle is not "What are our limits?" but rather, "What is God calling and helping us to be and do in this place in the name of Jesus Christ?"

When we hear the stories of deeply faithful, inventive, and gloriously unpredictable ways that small faith communities respond to God's invitation, it fills us with joy. How could we forget whose ministry we're talking about? Why would we expect anything less than abundant examples of deep caring, sacrificial outreach, vital worship, and transforming teaching?



This doesn't mean we avoid hard questions about the dilemmas faced by small membership churches. There are difficult issues to work out, including the appointment, training, and support of leaders; finding financial aid for burdens such as the collapse of rural economies; the special challenges of getting started in communities with new immigrants, and more. But when we start by paying attention to what matters most, it affects the presumptions, the commitments, and the energy with which we tackle how to support congregations of all sizes that are earnestly striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ in every possible place.

In the end my friend took the blade to be sharpened, but first he taught me to think about my assumptions! Perhaps this issue of *CR* will give you a chance to revisit your starting place in considering the past, present, and future ministries of small membership churches.

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