

A Response to the Significant Church Study

On January 17, 2023 the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, in partnership with eleven other organizations, launched the final report of their new study, entitled Significant Church: Understanding the Value of the Small Evangelical Church in Canada, “whose purpose was to understand from pastors what small churches need to function and flourish in Canada (183).” The authors of the study, Rick Hiemstra and Lindsay Callaway have done a great job of meeting that goal. This proposal is a response to that study. (Since all quotes come from that study, I will simply put quotation marks around the quote and a page number at the end of it.)

To download the study go to www.theEFC.ca/SignificantChurch.

What follows in this document is a call for the evangelical church to work together to develop a new approach to working with small churches. The author fully respects the uniqueness of every church, denomination, academic institution and organization that is currently working with small churches but believes that while maintaining that uniqueness, we can accomplish more working together than we can apart.

Introduction

The danger of a study such as this is that people will read it, comment on how good it is and then do nothing about it. This study needs to be taken seriously. We need to radically change our approach to small churches in our denominational offices, our academic institutions and our para-church organizations that are trying to support churches in Canada. What follows is a proposal on how this can happen.

There are thousands of small churches scattered across Canada. I don't have any hard data to provide certainty in regard to the number but everyone agrees that there are thousands spread over a wide variety of denominations. If all of the people who attend those churches could be counted, they would number in the hundreds of thousands. Large numbers of men, women and children receive their spiritual nurture in small-church settings. Yet according to the study done by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, there are serious problems facing those small churches.

Too often “small churches do not feel understood or respected by their denominational leaders or their peers in larger churches (14).” The report stressed the need for small-church leaders to be heard and respected by their denominational leaders so that they are “caring for small churches as they are rather than what they are not (183).” Too often denominational leaders determine what they would like small churches to be and then set out to prepare programs to get them there without ever once talking with any small-church leaders.

If the majority of churches are small, then it makes sense that the majority of seminary graduates are going to serve in small churches and yet at the academic level, small-church pastors do not feel that they were adequately prepared for the small-church ministry that they are doing. With this in mind, very few Bible college or seminaries offer these future pastors training in the practical challenges of working in small churches. The study states that “the small church pastors we interviewed and surveyed felt their ministry preparation was inadequate, especially their formal theological education (91).” There is a serious need for training aimed specifically at the issues facing small-church pastors.

There is no shortage of workshops, courses, seminars and conferences offered for church leaders in our evangelical world. One would think that every possible issue faced by churches today has been covered. Yet there are almost no resources designed specifically for small churches to apply within their small-church setting. The research study found that “a prevailing theme in studying the small church is the small church is different. A church of forty is not the same as a church of 4,000 (17). And yet there are very few resources put together by small-church leaders who understand small churches.

Facts About Small Churches

Small churches are different

A small church is not simply a smaller edition of a large church. Almost everyone who writes on the subject of the small church makes this point. I am not going to quote anyone on this because I could fill several pages of quotes that would all say the same thing. The small church is its own unique entity. It functions differently, thinks differently, and prioritizes differently than large churches do.

During my time working with a mission organization I did some training of people headed into another culture for the first time. One of the things that I told them over and over again was the fact that differences in culture aren't right and they aren't wrong. They are just different. This is true of small churches. How they do church isn't right. It isn't wrong. It is just different. With that in mind it must be treated differently. If people do not understand this fact then there is no foundation on which to build any kind of program for the small church.

Church size is not an indicator of health

A few decades ago I read an account of Joel Gregory's two years as pastor at First Baptist Church, Dallas. He was to step into the shoes of W.A. Criswell who at that time was the most famous preacher in the Southern Baptist denomination. Criswell was to work his way out of a job and Gregory was to take his place. It didn't work out. Criswell decided not to leave and Gregory left instead. I read Gregory's account of what happened there and decided that it was an account of one of the most unhealthy churches that I had ever come across. It was an account of church politics at its worst.

When I finished the book, I came to the conclusion that church health has nothing to do with size. I have held to that fact ever since.

There are unhealthy large churches and there are unhealthy small churches. There are healthy large churches and there are healthy small churches. Size is simply not the measure of church health. The goal of every program that anyone develops for the purpose of revitalizing churches or helping churches flourish or making churches healthy, or however else we might express it, should not be numerical growth alone. Church size is never the primary sign of church health.

Small churches tend to function according to a church covenant

One of the quotes that has changed my life is taken from a book entitled *Integrity* written by Henry Cloud. In a chapter on the importance of reality, he writes that “reality is always your friend.” In the Significant Church study, Hiemstra and Callaway identify something that clarified reality for me. They state that “small churches have implicit or unarticulated *congregational covenants* (44).” They go on to say that “these covenants are the core members’ shared understanding about what the congregation is about, its mission, why it exists and whom it serves (44).” Then they come to the very heart of why this is so important when they say that “leaders who cannot first demonstrate their faithfulness to the old covenant will not be trusted to lead the congregation into a new one (48).”

This last paragraph probably has elicited a variety of responses. There are probably some readers who are thinking that this is the problem with small churches. They are stuck in the past and won’t change. Other readers probably are reacting more positively thinking that it defines how small churches act. What the leader has to do is understand the covenant and then slowly bring about change. Whatever your reaction to what I have written, this is reality in the small church. Any approach that doesn’t take this into consideration, is building on fantasy.

Small-church pastors are the experts

As is suggested in the study, “small-church pastors are the experts in small-church ministry (183).” They are the people who are out there serving in a small-church context, finding answers to small-church problems and talking to other similar experts in other small churches. That again is reality.

One of the adjustments that I had as my children entered into adult life was the realization that there were aspects of life in which they were the experts. Today if I want to know something about computers, I ask my programmer son who is the expert. If I want to know more about some aspect of climate control, I ask my daughter who is an expert in that area. They simply know way more than I do about their areas of expertise.

Any denomination, academic institution or organization that develops programs for small churches without consulting the experts is not living within reality. Leaders who work with small churches need to listen to pastors in those churches more than they need to try to instruct them. If we don't listen, it is like me trying to tell my son how to run his computer. Once in a while I have discovered something that my son didn't know but those cases are very few and far between.

Small-church pastors deserve our respect

“In many cases, small churches do not feel understood or respected by their denominational leaders or their peers in larger churches (14).” This was one of the findings of the Significant Church study. For the most part the pastors interviewed and surveyed in the study had a positive view of their churches. Denominational leaders on the other hand saw small churches as needy, discouraged, insular or broken. With this view of small churches it is easy to see why small-church pastors would feel that they aren't given the respect that they should be given.

Most small-church pastors believe that they have been called by God into the small-church ministry in which they serve. They have the theological training required to serve as a pastor. They work as hard as the pastors in larger churches. They make a difference in the lives of their people. They deserve respect for the job that they do. Unfortunately they do not feel that they get that respect from other leaders. This has to change.

Where do we go from here?

The Significant Church study is a wonderful starting point in working with small churches but it is only a starting point. All of us who are leaders in the evangelical movement in Canada need to listen to the challenge that they give us at the end of their report.

“We set out to understand from pastors what small churches need to function and flourish in Canada. We believe due focus on supporting pastors in, and adequately preparing pastors for, small church ministry will impact the church for the better. More simply, small churches need to be understood and respected. This report is an opportunity to care for small churches as they are rather than what they are not (183).”

I want to suggest the following ways in which this can happen over the next few years.

Before we do anything else we need to listen to the experts who are right now serving in the trenches of small-church ministry.

Small Church Connections will set up a series of meetings across Canada in which small-church pastors can speak and denominational, academic and organizational leaders can listen.

We need to develop a set of national guidelines for working with small churches developed by and available to anyone working with small churches in Canada. Small-church pastors need to have a strong input into these guidelines.

At the moment everyone is trying to develop their own approach to working with small churches. The problem is the same for every denomination in that a large percentage of their churches are small. The challenge facing Bible colleges and seminaries of developing adequate training for future small-church pastors is the same. The desire of organizations to serve small churches in a helpful way is the same. If we are all aiming at the same goal, doesn't it make sense that we would all work together to develop a national strategy rather than using our resources to develop our own program.

At Small Church Connections we recognize that there is tremendous diversity within the church in Canada. Each church is unique in itself. There is no five-step program that will work equally well in all churches. Canada is a huge country and within the different parts of the country there is diversity. A church in Nova Scotia is very different from a church in Toronto which again is different from a church in rural Saskatchewan which is different from a church in Vancouver. Any strategy would have to consist of principles for working with small churches as opposed to a one program fits all approach.

We need to develop resources specifically for small-church leaders by people who have some experience in working with small churches.

Most of the resources available to pastors today have been developed in large church settings in which the authors have little understanding of the small church's needs. Last fall Small Church Connections held three small-church pastor retreats in which we invited small-church pastors to get away for a few days from the routine of ministry. Here are a few of the comments that we received from those who attended.

Thank you so much. I always feel a bit discouraged from the greater denominational retreats by reasons of their thrusting the 'successful' guy up front. I'm tired of big church boys teaching small church guys stuff they can't use. Absolutely none of that was present at the retreat. It was truly a blessing. Thank you for all your hard work.

We so appreciated all the time, effort and prayer/preparation that went into this retreat. It gave hope and encouragement to me as a pastor's wife in a small community. Thank you.

It was a great atmosphere of encouragement and connection. What I appreciated was not having "big church guys" tell us small church guys how to lead.

We received nothing but positive comments from the retreats and what I think set them apart for those who attended was that everything was geared for small-church leaders.

We need to develop a network that will result in a united effort to develop a new approach to small churches.

The task of building a whole new approach towards small churches is too large for any individual church, denomination, academic institution or organization to accomplish on its own. Evangelical leaders across Canada need to work together in conjunction with small-church pastors if this is going to happen. To facilitate this, Small Church Connections is planning to establish a small-church network open to anyone with a desire to serve small churches more effectively than we have in the past. Members of the network will be expected to participate in the following ways:

- contribute to the discussions between evangelical leaders and small-church pastors
- support programs designed specifically for small-church leaders whoever might sponsor them
- provide financial support at whatever level the members feel they can afford
- promote small churches in their own sphere of influence

Final Comments

The Significant Church research project has shown that we need to develop a whole new way of thinking about small churches in Canada. As I have stated in this proposal, this will involve a coordinated effort by denominations, academic institutions and para-church organizations all of whom have a kingdom mindset that is working for the good of all small churches in every part of the country. Small Church Connections is committed to doing this in partnership with anyone who will work along side them to bless the hundreds of thousands of people who attend those churches and the thousands of pastors who work in them.