

FINDING SIGNIFICANCE AS A SMALL CHURCH

Imagine a company with more than 300,000 small retail outlets, which are locally owned and supported. Their presence is so evenly distributed geographically that every county in the U.S. has one or more outlets—in some cases, even dozens of outlets. Almost all own their facilities and attract millions of volunteers. If such an enterprise existed, it would be widely recognized as a success story of unmatched magnitude. Such an organization does exist. It is the story of American congregations, whose founding dates go back hundreds of years. Frequently, commentators focus on the size of each church rather than the large numbers of congregations engaged in ministry in local communities. If a congregation is small, is it also small in mission or significance? What are we worth?

How Location Does and Doesn't Matter

When a small congregation claims a small corner of creation as their own, their corner is the same size as any other church. In this way, all congregations are created equal—uniquely called to a particular spot on the globe. Further, worshipers and leaders believe that God founded their church or parish at a particular moment in history. Members reveal this belief in the stories they tell about the church's founding, in the biblical characters that members reference as inspiring, and in the hymns that members find most meaningful.

The more than 150-year history of one church illustrates how often members faced the question, "Is something significant happening here?" In 1849, nine members organized a church in the heart of their Southern city. Three years later, they purchased two lots downtown as a site for their sanctuary. During the Civil War, the church closed but later reopened with six members. After demolishing the old sanctuary and rebuilding in the same spot, the congregation worshiped in their new sanctuary for the first time in 1918

just as World War I ended. In 1955, after defeating a proposal to relocate, the congregation divided into two churches, one of which relocated to a different site. Another motion to relocate was defeated in 1980. Then in 2004, a motion to merge with another congregation (with the understanding that their church would close) failed. The congregation struggled until 2007 when they called a new full-time pastor. Over the next six years, various innovations and new strategies yielded a revitalized ministry in the *same place* established in 1849.¹

Why Do We Feel Insignificant?

Lewis Parks writes in *Small on Purpose* that to say "God" is to insist that there is more here than meets the eye in the small church. He says there is always "more" in our midst, but leaders spend too much time checking for symptoms rather than looking for strengths.² He cautions against simple solutions and encourages leaders to find ways to release energy and surrender "wish dreams."



Multiple disrupters cloud the perspective of small-church leaders, their members, and even denominational leaders. Here are several foes that hinder small churches from realizing their significance.

The focusing illusion. People assume that someone who becomes disabled will be unhappy. Yet people prove to be remarkably resilient when they focus on all the things they can still do or enjoy, in spite of their disability, rather than on the activities they can no longer do. Two economists first identified this mismatch between happiness and a real life condition or living experience.³ In a similar way, when a congregation focuses on one thing—often something they regard as a deficit—the members undervalue other aspects that play a role in their vitality. A one-factor focus exaggerates the importance of that one dynamic, which then incorrectly equates significance with that one factor.

As the church story above illustrates, the congregation repeatedly faced the focusing illusion—change the location and our ministry will be revitalized—and yet their continued successful ministry came because they repeatedly rejected the single-factor solution. Location is not the only single factor subject to the focusing illusion. Congregations overestimate the difference other single factors might make, such as finding the right pastor, starting a youth program, building new educational facilities, and more parking.

Distractions. Agitations large and small can cause irreversible harm. Small ones may go unnoticed and unevaluated, yet still direct us away from what is most significant in our church's ministry. Large ones lure the congregation away by their size, complexity, and demands for attention. Recording and reviewing distractions allows leaders to objectify, and thereby evaluate and possibly dismiss many noisy but unimportant demands. Therefore, in addition to marking which distractions are worth exploration, focus can also mean discerning what you are *not* going to do.

Inward focus vs. outward focus. Clergy turnover, budget constraints, building maintenance, aging members, and declining attendance are examples of issues that can easily swallow up all the attention of church leaders. Without due diligence, a focus on these internal matters will snuff out the light the congregation offers to the community. A congregation that is “out of balance” in terms of inward vs. outward focus begins to

feel less significant in the world. Members can feel like the church only exists for current members unless they stay focused on how they can make a difference in the community. When a church finds a genuine human need in the community and develops ways to address that need, it thrives.

Imagine a Blueprint for Significance

A blogger writes about reinventing the work experience and gives a “recipe for significance.”⁴ Church leaders can translate this advice into language that helps them better grasp the significance of their congregation's ministry.⁵ When people—or in this instance, congregations—operate in survival or security mode, they lose track of what matters most to them. Ask a leadership group to discuss the following questions:

- What do we really care about? What matters most to us as a congregation?
- Can we list ten of the most significant achievements of this congregation? Why do we believe these accomplishments are significant?
- Do we have the creativity to create the next chapter of our congregation's life?

Claiming Local Religious Creativity

The scale of small-membership churches grants opportunities for broad participation. The witness of persons in the pew includes prayers, presence, gifts, and service.⁶ Parks asserts that church is one of the few places where people regularly gather and sing. He concludes that worship is the most important thing a small church does. Other small-church gifts involve serving as the community's prayer voice, providing soul care, being a surrogate family, and a place of “time out.” In every community, people whose life story has been disrupted, seek God's presence, and search for a local place of worship.⁷

1. <http://1stpresalbany.org/who-we-are/our-history>.

2. Lewis A. Parks, *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 10.

3. Daniel Kahneman and David Schkade, <https://www.economics.com/whatis/the-focusing-illusion/>.

4. <https://powertochange.com/discover/world/significantwork/>

5. See also Church Effectiveness Nugget, 25 Turnaround Strategies for Small-Membership Congregations, <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2014%20.pdf>.

6. Parks, 38-39.

7. *Ibid.*, 60.