

2005 National Conference on Tentmaking/Bi-vocational Ministry

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Panel Presentation

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TENTMAKING – FROM A CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

(Comments by the Rev. David Ezekiel, Associate Executive Presbyter for Congregational Development in the Presbytery of Chicago, at the National Tentmaker's Conference held at St. Mary's of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, IL, on Saturday, November 5, 2005. This event is hosted by NASSAM, the National Association for the Self-Supporting Active Ministry - Episcopalians, and APT, the Association of Presbyterian Tentmakers).

One aphorism that has made the rounds for years has been, “The Lord must love small churches because God created so many of them”. I do not mean to imply that we are limiting ourselves, exclusively, to smaller membership congregations, but that is largely the scope of what we are talking about today. And that is very true in all of our denominations.

Let me just cite you some statistics about Presbyterian churches. Presbyterian churches tend to be small. A little over two-thirds (69 percent) of congregations have 200 or fewer members (63% of our congregations have no more than 150 members). Citing numbers for the Synod of Lincoln Trails, which encompasses Illinois and Indiana, we find that 22.4% of our churches (152) have 50 members, or less; 24% (163) have 51-100 members; 16.6% (113) have 101-150 members [while 8.2% (56 congregations) are in the 150-200 range].¹ And the majority of them are trying to afford full-time pastors. This means that 2/3rds of our churches cannot effectively afford to have a full-time pastor.

The average size – that is, the total membership of our church divided by the total number of particular congregations – is 214 members. But, the median size – the half-way point in the size of all of our congregations – is 109. In the PC(USA), that translates into 5509 congregations are larger and 5509 are smaller in number than the mid-point of the size of our denomination. And that number has been declining for years. As recently as 1994, the mid-point was 130 members.²

A practical way of looking at this scenario is to visually see in your mind as you stand in the pulpit looking at your audience that your congregation has fewer than 71 members sitting in the pews. Or, it would be a little more than the amount of people seated here at this gathering this morning.

And there is another pattern at the opposite end of the spectrum that has emerged. The top 10% of our congregations has slightly more than half of all of our denomination's membership. And Presbyterians are not alone in that area as it is pretty much indicative of all mainline denominations.

One factor that is emerging out of this trend is that our larger-membership congregations are contributing the majority of our candidates for ministry. But, when these individuals graduate, their first call is often to a smaller-membership church. When these graduates come out of seminary, their operating paradigm for ministry is the larger-membership church. And you know, as well as I do, that smaller-membership churches do not have the financial resources, nor the people resources, to do the kinds of ministry things to which one has always been accustomed. This often results in unrealized expectations for both parties and can lead to frustration or the onset of conflict.

In fact, the smaller the size of a congregation that is attempting to afford a full-time pastor, the greater the stress-levels become. Anytime that a pastor's salary consumes more than 60% of the budget, there is a greater likelihood of problems that are going to occur. This is unfortunately borne out by the increasing incidents of conflict. This leads to a higher incidence of pastoral turnover, clergy burn-out, and, more and more frequently, forced terminations. In fact, the recommended minimum-size for a congregation to have a full-time, installed pastor, with a part-time assistant, is 150 members. Even that number does not guarantee that the church will be comfortably situated.

Enter the tentmaker. Y'all (I am a Southerner, even the Apostle Paul was from Southern Judea – notice how many times in his epistles he says, “you all”) will become an increasing presence in the pulpits of our churches. I checked the PC(USA)'s call referral website yesterday and found 24 listings for part-time/tentmakers.

As congregations decline in size it causes much anguish and angst. They have been accustomed to having a full-time pastoral presence and have memories of a church staff. This is where the skilled, intentional tentmaker will be able to play a significant transitioning role for the congregation. As you enter situations like that, you are going to have to help them to grieve the loss of the world they once knew. You will be called upon to help them relinquish that world and live into another one.

Often that will mean that you will be called upon to mediate conflicts, deal with issues of deferred maintenance on the building and around the property, and an overall sense of spiritual depression. But, you will also be able to help them rebuild hope. The real issue in any congregational system is not how large it is, but how effectively it thrives.

One of the things of which judicatories are becoming aware is that smaller-membership churches with a less than a full-time pastor have different needs from those of larger-membership congregations. Governing bodies will need to become acutely aware of the dynamics of each individual church. Many times when these churches are looking for a pastor, the governing body that places the minister will often try and find a “warm body” to go in and just preach. Too little regard is given to understanding the nature of that community of faith. We need to be looking for pastors who will fit with the particular congregation rather than just placing someone who wants little more than a weekend paycheck. Another first thought among judicatories is that neighboring small churches in close-by communities should be merged together. But, unless it is a merger of similar congregations and the combining of strengths, a merger seldom succeeds. What has usually occurred is a merger of weaknesses that only exacerbates the situation and delays the inevitable.

Likewise, it is the same with the formation of a multiple church parish (our Methodist friends would refer to this as a three-, or the, God forbid, what-did-you-ever-do-to-offend-the-Bishop

five-point charge). There are too many congregation dynamics occurring within the life of each church that makes it a unique, living organism.

It also means that as the pastor has a primary work responsibility at another job, that individual has less and less time to participate in the necessary work of committees in judicatory life. And, consequently, there are fewer elders who are able, or willing, to go the Presbytery meetings. The result is that the church loses its connection to the larger body. And there is a correlation regarding those churches that have little or no connection with the regional governing body and the rise in the number of internal problems. When congregations lose touch, they forget where resources and help may be found before it is too late.

Each congregation is different and has unique characteristics. But each also possesses wonderful gifts that are just waiting to be offered in service to God. I did not intend to sound any negativity, I am just articulating from a governing body level that which you already know – we do not know how to effectively empower our smaller membership congregations and part-time pastors. This is something that we are wrestling with and are beginning to re-think.

However, I do know something wonderful about the smaller-membership church. It is the very root structure of the Church of Jesus Christ. Mighty oaks from little acorns grow. I have confidence that if God did it before, God can do it again.

¹ Statistics taken from the PC(USA) Congregations and Membership — 1994-2004 Report, Table 2, which is found online at <http://www.pcusa.org/research/compstats/cs2004.htm>.

² From Table 1.