



'WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO EMBRACE OUR SMALLNESS'

BY FRAN BELLINGHAM

More than half our Union's churches are now classed as small (40 members and below). What if we are being challenged to be church in a different way?

Following the news that over 50 per cent of our Baptist churches are now in the small church category, many comments I heard were about how disappointing and sad that was. But, what if we were never meant to be big in the first place? What if this is a move of the Spirit, calling us back to our foundations? What if we are being challenged to be church in a different way?

Looking at these figures we might feel despondent. However at the height of the 19th century chapel building era, where one chapel was being built every eight days in Wales, only 52 per cent of the population attended either church or chapel. In *A New Mission to Wales (2016)*, David Ollerton notes that by the 1970s this number had halved, and between 1982 and 2010 the number of Baptist churches dropped from 833 to 429. Despite these figures,

our memory is often coloured by imagination. We remember when our churches appeared full, we remember the many meetings and missionary endeavours of our churches, but our memory can be deceptive. It can also be coloured by grief, longing for what we wished for in the past, when the culture and social climate in which we lived was very different. We no longer live with the privilege of Christendom.

Covid and subsequent lockdowns, with the attendant rise of online services, has highlighted the consumerist attitudes that pervade the Church. These can perhaps be traced to the late 19th century where people would travel to hear such speakers as Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, and Evan Roberts during the Welsh revival. But our Baptist forebears did not choose to worship according to the professionalism of the worship band, the provision of youth services and big-name preachers. Instead, they covenanted together to walk as saints, often travelling large distances to a small gathering held in the nearest house of fellow Baptists. Corporate worship often included extensive Bible

readings, several sermons, and no singing! (For further reading see *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism (2013)* by Mark Clavier.)

The pre-Constantine churches were of necessity small, only as large as the home in which they met. Once that home had been outgrown, they would plant another small church in the neighbourhood, creating a network of small churches. In his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church (2016)*, church historian Alan Kreider shows how the early church focussed on habitus - living out their faith in the struggles of daily life, without evangelism as we would know it. Christians were known by their faithful discipleship. It is the matter of discipleship that Dallas Willard laments, regarding it as 'The Divine Omission.' While much effort has been spent on evangelism, has spiritual formation and discipleship attracted as much attention?

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Jesus regularly referred to the small and seemingly insignificant as being markers of the kingdom: the mustard seed, the grains of salt, or molecules of yeast. The kingdom of God is not marked by numbers but seen through the actions of disciples, the poor and the insignificant. It is suggested that in 315CE Christians only accounted for 10 per cent of the population in the Roman Empire.² Equally, throughout the Old Testament, Israel is a small nation sitting amid the large, expansionist and violent empires of the ages: Babylonia, Assyria, Greece and Rome. Despite Israel's size, God's call on the nation was to be as a light to the nations around, to have influence greater than her size.

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What would it mean to 'embrace our smallness'? Firstly, we need to resist the myth of perpetual growth. This is the ugly truth of empire when taken to its zenith. Empire is not interested in individual expression, locality, or indigenous culture. Empire is unmoved by grief, loss and human pain. The constant goal of empire is to expand and control, no matter what the cost. We might not think that this view of empire has anything to do with church, and yet scaled down, it has everything to do with how we organise not only the Church, but our local churches. We have adopted business practices that our forebears would have found incongruent with simply being God's gathered people in a particular location.

There is a difference between trying to grow our own empire and wanting to see the Kingdom of God and the universal Church grow. Embracing our smallness might mean focussing more on our mutual associations as churches, recognising we need each other in the wider Baptist family. It might mean recognising that we cannot do everything, but each church can do perhaps one thing well, relying on the gifts within our fellowships and not trying to be as professional or slick in our presentation as the next church. It might mean sharing ordained ministry and leadership roles, re-evaluating the purpose of ordained ministry according to Ephesians 4:11-12 and seeking to train the church to be able to continue without a regular minister. It might mean learning to plod, regaining the notion of pilgrimage, of dispersed community and adopting some of practices of the early Celtic and Anabaptist church. It will mean larger churches not regarding the small church with condescension or pity.

Ultimately, embracing our smallness will cause us to be reliant on the Holy Spirit and allow ourselves to be surprised by new things. Although church membership may be declining, research shows that the number of non-church goers claiming to be disciples of Jesus is increasing, God is not confined to our churches. We simply need to see where God is working in the world and join in. This might mean challenging our long-held views of church, but the future for small churches could be very exciting.

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Fran Bellingham leads the London Baptists (LB) Small Church Connexion. The purpose of the Connexion is to provide a unique and supportive network within LB for churches with 40 people or less. The team has a heart and a passion for the health, well-being and growth of the smaller churches across London.

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