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MISUNDERSTANDING THE SMALL CHURCH

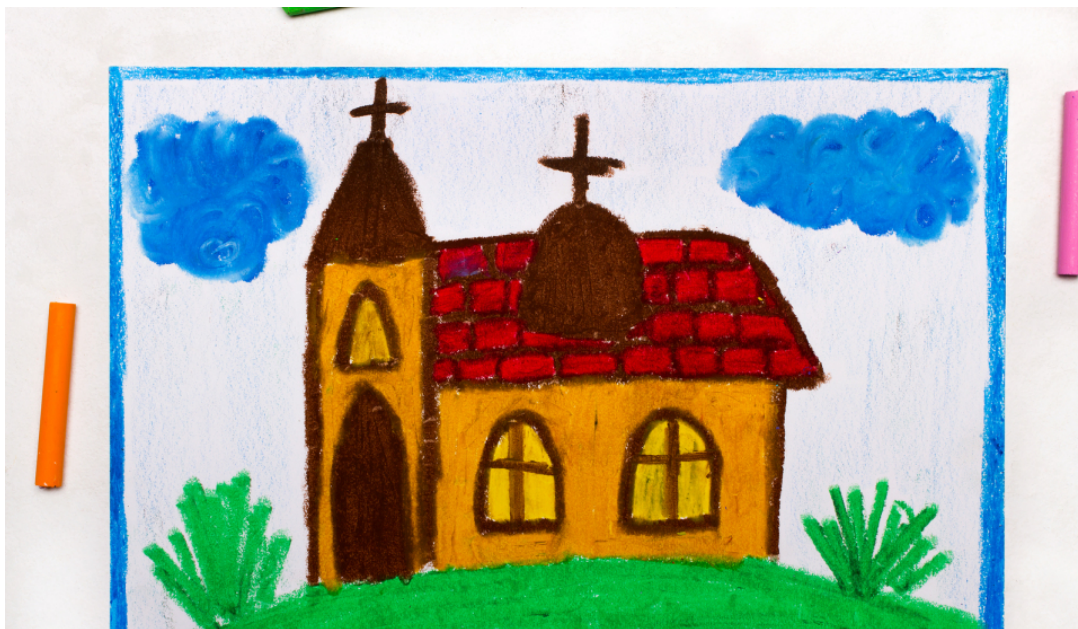
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By Allen T. Stanton

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Recently, Cottage Grove United Methodist Church, a small congregation in Minnesota, found its way to national attention when [a local newspaper reported](#) that senior citizen members were being asked to leave while the congregation is restarted. *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* included scathing quotes from current church members, who resented an apparent request to be silent partners, supporting the church financially and otherwise, with the understanding that they would not attend the

The Washington Post [reported that much of this was a misunderstanding](#), which is probably true. United Methodist polity is complex, and the contemporary media often fails to report on the nuances of religion accurately. According to *The Washington Post*, members who are not part of the replant team are asked to attend a sister congregation for a lengthy period before returning to the newly planted congregation. This allows for the new plant to have time to bloom and blossom.

As someone who works to support small churches, I am not particularly surprised by any of this. The area where this small church is located is growing rapidly, and there is an opportunity to have a growing church, so a rather conventional relaunch plan was put into place. It's also not surprising that church members were upset.

From the outside looking in, I'm not in a place to analyze the specifics of this particular story. Instead, what stands out to me is our culture's deep confusion and unease about what to do with the large number of small-membership churches. Within The United Methodist Church, our indicators of vitality are heavily biased toward large membership churches. For example, under the now almost decade old *Towers-Watson Report*, the number of small groups is an indicator for vitality, with vital churches having more. The difference between the number of small groups in a vital small church and a non-vital small church, though, is less than one. It's an impossible measurement that is of no actual help to small-membership churches.

To put it bluntly, small membership churches — and particularly rural small-membership churches — are seen to be places of little value. I'm no longer surprised when I meet with colleagues who openly disparage these churches, though I am perpetually disappointed.

Covenant Associations report on the formation of ministry task force, a listed priority is multiplying churches in “significant communities in a geographic area,” which seems to leave out smaller communities, including rural ones. And, as noted earlier, the guidance of reports like the *Towers-Watson Report* offers no real support for small-membership churches.

All of this is deeply distressing to me for a myriad of reasons having to do with the unseen potential of these congregations. Small-membership churches populate most of our rural communities, where the church is often the only permanent institution. In these settings, they are still trusted organizations, and they are one of the few places, if not the only place, that members of the communities from across different sectors gather on a regular basis. Small-membership churches can be quite nimble, and tend to have higher rates of volunteers. And, according to at least one study in 2016, almost half of Americans attend churches that have an average worship attendance of less than 100.

To be clear, I am not Pollyanna about the future of small churches. Certainly, there will be many churches that have to close or be repurposed, just as I am not confident that every large church will survive a pastoral transition.

What I am suggesting is that small-membership churches have a vital role to play in the ecosystem of faith communities. We might learn something, for instance, from small churches like Sanford First United Methodist Church in Florida, which averages 84 in worship each week but is fundamentally transforming their community by [launching a nonprofit collaboration space](#) and emphasizing a ministry with the homeless. We can look to Gainesboro First UMC (average worship attendance of 55), whose new youth center pairs youth and mentors to learn valuable skills for their future, while growing as people and disciples. We can explore the work of small churches like Conetoe (pronounced Kah-NEE-tah) in rural

[fundamentally transformed a community.](#)

What happened in Cottage Grove is simply a natural outcome of a church culture that has not reckoned with the positive gifts of small-membership churches, their unique role in their communities and the potential they have for dynamic leadership. It is the result of a conversation that tends to disparage, rather than seek to build upon, the lives of small faith-communities. It is the outpouring of frustration from small churches who feel – and are – misunderstood, frustrated and exhausted from the perpetual onslaught of church growth tactics that are ill-suited for their context.

I am not convinced that the decision in Cottage Grove is a bad one. There are times when a new start is necessary. There are times when a church must end, and our job, just as it is with parishioners at the end of life, is to help those congregations die well.

What I suspect, though, is that the animosity, the miscommunication and the grief are the unfortunate results of a system that does not understand the potential of the small-membership church. Until we learn to rethink the role of small churches in our ecosystem of faith, we shouldn't be surprised by stories like these.

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