

# **The big picture for small churches —and large ones, too!**

**How to thrive and survive as a small congregation**

John Benton



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First published 2005

Second impression 2010

This edition 2020

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available**

ISBN: 978-1-78397-302-6

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*To the Lord's  
faithful and often despised  
little flocks  
all over the world*

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## Preface to the 2020 edition

**When** I wrote this book over 15 years ago, I had quite a battle with the then editor—who I hasten to say is a good guy—to get the words ‘Small Churches’ into the title. He felt the very words might discourage people from buying it. We all tend to be more immediately attracted to things which come across as uplifting and successful.

Since then there has been a growing recognition of the need to come alongside, support and revitalise smaller churches and many good people and Christian organisations have turned their minds to this great challenge.

There are a number of causes for encouragement as I survey the scene.

*First*, I am thrilled to see that some Bible colleges and training schemes have begun to specifically address the needs of little congregations in their courses. In fact sometime ago I actually took a phone call from a seminary professor from the Netherlands asking me how he could get hold of more copies

of this book because it dealt with just the topics he felt were most relevant to those training for the ministry in his country.

*Second*, it is wonderful to see a number of younger men starting out in the ministry who have been prepared to jump in at the deep end and commit themselves and their families to rebuilding churches which have dwindled. One of these wrote this:

In the summer of 2013 I was encouraged by one godly retired pastor to preach at a small church in southwest London. In spite of the church having been without a pastor for a number of years, I rather naively thought little of the summer visit. However, when my wife and I met the very small faithful group of Christians gathering there we instantly felt an affinity. The church, which fitted none of my aforementioned ministerial ideals, called me to be their pastor.

That young man and his family have gone to the church and got involved with a passion. The church has begun to change and now there is real hope for the future.

*Third*, I am encouraged to say that God himself is in the work of revitalizing smaller congregations. One particular story sticks out. The church had actually closed. But one man of faith I know felt under God that he should seek to open it again. On Easter Sunday a few years ago the church had a service, many well-wishers came, and the man preached. But the following Sunday of course reality kicked in. He went to the building, opened it up and besides himself nobody came. What was he to do. He prayed and decided that whether or

not there was a congregation he would have a service. So on his own he sang, read the Scriptures, prayed and preached. The service came to an end. He put on his coat and went outside and began locking up. Just then an African woman came up to him. ‘What have you being doing?’ she asked. ‘I’ve been praising God,’ replied my friend. ‘But you were on your own,’ she said. ‘Yes, I know’ he confessed. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘if you have a service next week, I will come.’ It turned out that the lady was fairly new to the UK, she had seen the empty church building near her home, and had been praying that the Lord would do something. Over the next few months, first one and then others, began to come along. The church now numbers around fifty worshippers on Sundays and has its own pastor again. God it seems is not just in the business of church revitalization, but of church resurrection!

And if God is concerned to help small churches, it must be a good thing for us to get involved with too.

**John Benton,**  
Guildford, March 2020



# Introduction

A few years ago I was asked to go and give two papers to a conference of pastors, elders and deacons in the north of England on the subject of encouraging small churches. As I prayed and studied for that occasion, I began to feel very burdened for the many little flocks up and down the land. I felt touched by their struggles.

So often they are not only sneered at by the world, but sometimes feel belittled as the poor relations by Christians who have the benefit of enjoying the life of a larger fellowship. This book is something I have felt driven to write, hopefully as an expression of the Lord's love to churches which may feel weak and in need.

What is a small church? How do you define small? There are a couple of issues here.

Firstly, do you define the size of a church by its paper membership, or by the attendance at its meetings, particularly on Sundays? I have tended to think in terms of regular

attendance and commitment. This is the only sensible way of looking at how big a church is for practical and gospel purposes.

Secondly, given that way of assessing things, how do we decide the boundaries between small, average and larger churches? In answering this question I spoke briefly with an organization that produces a lot of statistics about churches. Their rule of thumb went something like this. Churches with a usual attendance of over 300 people were looked upon as very large. More than 150 people put the church in the 'large' bracket. Over 50 or 60 people meant you belonged to the 'average' category. But less than 50 or 60 people meant that they looked upon the church as small.

Obviously all this is somewhat arbitrary and subjective. I am sure there are many little congregations, perhaps in rural settings, where if they saw as many as 50 people in the congregation on Sunday morning they would think revival had broken out. Nevertheless, it is churches with less than 50 people committed to them that I have in mind. And I suppose my heart is with groups which are even smaller than that.

The church where I serve is a good church and the people have been very good to me over the years. We started just in the 'small' category and now there are more of us. We have been blessed as we have tried to work out in just a little way some of the ideas discussed in this book. However, we are far from perfect and I cannot say that we are an exact example of

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all that I advocate in this book. We are all sinners and do not always measure up to all we would like to be.

However, having said that, hopefully, the contents of this book will be a help and encouragement to all churches, small and large. Many of the issues we explore are relevant to every church no matter how many people attend. Satan attacks churches regardless of size. We need to be clear on the gospel whether we are few or many. We must all access the resources of the Holy Spirit's power, for 'the arm of the flesh will fail', however many we are. The qualities of a healthy church are the same no matter how big or little we may be.

I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Stuart Olyott, who in one brief conversation gave me some very helpful ideas about the way forward for small churches. I have tried to write this book for both church members and church leaders. So, whatever part you play in the body of Christ, and whatever church you are from, may the Lord use these pages to give new vision and enthusiasm. The Lord Jesus has promised, 'I will build my church.'