

# 6 Tips from Small Church for Ministries of Any Size

By Elmer Towns • 07/20/2012

A few years ago, my neighbors, Dan and Jill Johnson and their two kids, became enthralled with a megachurch. About every other month, they'd travel 200 miles to attend and soak up the excitement of the super church—the lively, professional worship, the elaborate stage sets, the extensive children's ministry. It seemed like the super church had the answer to all their spiritual yearnings.

Soon, a job transfer brought them to the Northeastern city they'd been visiting—finally, they could attend their dream church every weekend. A few weeks later, they packed up their home and that Saturday night, camped out in their new house. But the next morning, instead of going to “super church,” due to a dead car battery, they found themselves at the small Baptist church across the street from their home.

Within 10 minutes of walking through the door, the Johnsons were fielding requests. The greeters asked Jill if she had ever taught children. Another greeter asked Dan if he would assist in ushering. During the week, members from the small church visited Dan and Jill and convinced them to help out through August until all their vacationing members had returned. The Johnsons agreed that they'd put off attending the megachurch until school began.

Turns out the family never joined their dream church—the magnetism of the small neighborhood Baptist church overcame the alluring experiences of the super church.

What can you learn from the Johnsons' story and their church? My 35-plus years of research and experience with small church ministry has uncovered six specific and transferable principles churches of all sizes can adapt in their own unique context.

**1) That's “my” church.** In small churches, people think in terms of “my church.” Small church members are much more likely to be involved with the total life of the congregation. And because they are and feel involved, both adults and children are usually more willing to be used in ministry, to give more sacrificially, and to pray more consistently than megachurch attendees. When you connect members to ministry, in essence you connect them to the very life of your church.

**2) People should know they're necessary.** In congregations of 75 or fewer, people feel necessary when they're serving and missed when they're not around. They realize that it takes everyone to carry the load, so they tend to show up for “Cleanup Saturday” or give to a designated project, or attend a business meeting. In megachurches, most people don't feel that sense of necessity. If they don't serve, someone else will do it. If they don't tithe one week, others will pick up the slack.

Remember the Johnsons. Ultimately, this family felt needed. I hope that all believers, regardless of church size, have a compelling desire to please Christ and serve Him. That's why they attend church. Small churches that make their members feel needed cultivate that compelling desire more keenly than larger churches that allow their members to get lost in the crowd.

**3) Relationships are key.** Members of healthy small churches remain extremely loyal to their church home, primarily because they have relationships there. In a small church, it isn't difficult to meet and get to know others, to learn names and find a basis to form relationships.

At a time when families are cocooning in front of computer screens, home theater systems and video games, the relationships with other Christians that a small church affords and nurtures every weekend become increasingly important.

Moreover, research suggests that the average small church is made up of five family groups, and usually someone from each family group is involved in the leadership or governing of that local church. What does that say about the small church? In blood family relationships, people know and relate to one another, accepting both the bad and the good of a person. Yet, when you move out of the small church environment and into a larger church, the "five-family hypothesis" loses its impact, and those familial relationships dissolve.

The nature of small churches encourages members to depend on other people and build relationships—and that dependency often cultivates loyalty and authentic community.

**4) Accountability breeds spiritual maturity.** Small churches understand that accountability to both God and others is essential to developing mature Christians. None of us want to lead or be part of a church that isn't seeing their members grow into Christlikeness. A small church allows people to live life with each other, as members frequently see one another—each weekend at worship, during the week in a small group and often in a Bible study or ministry team meeting.

In a megachurch, face time is rare—usually once a week in a small group but almost never at worship. Ministry that is crowd-based, and usually crowd-directed, doesn't typically reach to the personal relationship level. In a vibrant church that offers involvement, significance and relationship (the above three principles), people become accountable to God, to others and to their church.

**5) Pastor proximity nurtures discipleship.** A small church often affords its members an actual friendship with the pastor and pastoral staff. It's not difficult to meet and know the leaders—and come to them for counsel. That kind of pastor proximity—not found in a megachurch—often nurtures church loyalty and the desire for discipleship.

**6) The church doesn't revolve around the pastor.** Because people in a small church know their pastors personally—their strengths and weaknesses, their assets and flaws—they're also less likely to create a pastorcentric church and instead build a church that's about people—not the leader. Most megachurches are magnets for dynamic communicators that create a large following. When people can honestly say they're part of a church because they find true community and they're growing spiritually there—not just for the great teaching on the weekends—you know your church is not pastorcentric.

Megachurches have made certain contributions, and we should praise God for their influence in our modern world, but never overlook the contribution of the small church as a protective womb where individuals are nurtured as they live for Jesus Christ.