

Smaller Congregations and Stephen Ministry

Smaller congregations sometimes wonder whether they can or should enroll in the Stephen Series. They ask questions such as:

- Will Stephen Ministry work for us?
- Can we afford to do Stephen Ministry?
- Isn't Stephen Ministry mainly for larger congregations?
- Can't the pastor meet all our care needs?
- Won't care happen naturally in our congregation, without a lot of organization?
- What are the key issues that would make or break Stephen Ministry in our congregation?

These are all valid questions for small congregations who are considering investing their time, effort, and funds in Stephen Ministry.

It is important to define the term *small congregation*, since definitions and perceptions can vary widely. Taking a cue from Lyle Schaller, we are defining a smaller congregation as one that has 85 or fewer persons in worship on an average Sunday. Note, however, that a church with 85 in worship would be larger than over 70 percent of all U.S. churches. (Incidentally, larger congregations may benefit from

reading this paper by sorting through some of the same issues related to their own situations.)

When looking at the Stephen Series, smaller congregations might want to consider the following five areas.

1. Needs for Care

Stephen Ministry is designed to equip lay persons to meet caregiving needs related to the regular, expected challenges and crises of life. A congregation can evaluate how many persons within their membership and community are experiencing personal challenges and crises and, most importantly, how well these individuals are being cared for. A partial list of the challenges and crises includes:

- hospitalization
- death of a loved one
- job loss
- retirement
- separation or divorce
- disability
- terminal illness of self or family member
- childbirth/adoption
- empty nest
- spiritual crisis

More Care Needed

Such needs often require more care than is commonly recognized. For example, Howard Clinebell, a seminary professor and expert in the field of caregiving, wrote the following about significant loss in his book, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*:

When death or any severe loss strikes, the usual response is feelings of psychological numbness and shock (nature's anesthesia) mixed with feelings of unreality—of being in a nightmare from which one expects to awaken. The mind cannot yet accept the overwhelming pain—the reality that the person is really gone. Accepting the full reality of the loss must eventually occur or the healing will be incomplete. This acceptance must occur gradually, usually over a period of months.¹

The key phrase is “usually over a period of months.” While pastors usually can offer crisis care at the time of death and funeral, for example, they often find it difficult to provide adequate follow-up care because of time constraints. Lay persons, on the other hand, *want* to offer care but may not know *how*. The Stephen Series equips these lay persons to turn their good intentions into practical help. This helps ensure that necessary follow-up care happens.

Is Size Alone Enough?

Sometimes smaller congregations wonder whether their size allows them to care naturally without a need for training and structure. Since “everyone knows everyone,” caregiving can take place automatically. But does it? Without a plan for caregiving ministry, it is very easy for mem-

bers of a congregation to overlook the needs of others for ongoing support. Persons may actively visit for a month after the funeral, for example, but what about three months, or six months, or longer?

2. Ministry Priorities and Niche

While all congregations need to prioritize their ministries, smaller congregations need to do so even more carefully. Larger congregations often have the resources to do a number of activities simultaneously. Smaller congregations are confronted with making choices more frequently. Which need to fulfill? How to address that need? What ministries to emphasize?

■ A smaller congregation can proactively choose what it wants to focus on and be known for.

They face more challenging decisions because their human, financial, and physical resources can stretch only so far. This leads into what could be called “niche” ministry. A smaller congregation can proactively choose what it wants to focus on and be known for. Caring ministry, such as through the Stephen Series, might be one such niche ministry for a smaller congregation. Lyle Schaller, in his book *The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow*, recommends this as one option for vitalizing small congregations:

Carve out a distinctive niche. If you are one of three or four congregations affiliated with the same denomination in that general community, identify and fill a clearly defined niche.²

The Stephen Series could form the foundation for a small congregation's ministry for both inreach to members and outreach to the community.

Caregiving is a ministry that might be of even greater immediate importance to smaller congregations than to larger congregations. Effective caregiving helps a

■ Being known as a caring church is a powerful witness.

congregation retain current members and attract new members. Not feeling cared for during a time of need is a major reason persons give for leaving congregations.

Caregiving ministry can also help a congregation attract and retain new members by becoming part of the congregation's reputation. Being known as a caring church is a powerful witness. This can influence newcomers to attend for the first time and return for subsequent visits, and also create the opportunity for them to become active in the life of the congregation in meaningful ways.

A Bright Light

An effective niche ministry can be a bright light, not only for the community, but for the congregation also. This is especially true for smaller congregations who may feel surrounded by large churches with multiple high-profile ministries. Finding their niche can help smaller congregations feel good and be good about their mission and ministry. The Stephen Series provides congregations with a powerful way to offer high-quality caregiving ministry to their com-

munity. Stephen Ministers provide care to persons in the local hospital(s), hospice(s) and nursing home(s), and to others who are referred to them. Word of this caregiving reaches the community. People begin to say, "That church may be small, but they sure do help people."

3. Leadership

The Stephen Series addresses common leadership challenges that smaller congregations face. One common challenge is a shortage of paid staff. Ministry all too often has been something that "the minister" does. When this view is taken to an extreme, ministry becomes the task of a salaried employee. Yet even large congregations with several pastors and other professionals on staff find that they cannot hire salaried persons for all the ministry they need. Ultimately, the only workable solution is one that is also biblical: the ministry of lay persons. The Stephen Series affirms the ministry of lay persons by taking seriously their gifts for Christian service, including caregiving. With the Stephen Series, smaller congregations can also build a team of lay leaders who work with their pastors to implement caregiving ministry.

The Pastor Remains Key

While lay persons can implement and manage this caregiving ministry through the Stephen Series, the pastor remains a key person in its success. The pastor is an important decision-maker. His or her support is vital to the effectiveness of any ministry in any congregation and especially so in smaller congregations. His or her support also increases the likelihood that key lay leaders will be in favor of lay caregiving.

Church consultant William Easum writes,

*Someone must have a vision of what can be. I have never seen an instance in which this vision did not come from the pastor. . . . The pastor has a passionate vision for something more than what is or was and is willing to lead the way.*³

While it is highly desirable that the pastor attend leader's training in order to gain a full knowledge of his or her role in

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Stephen Ministry, the ministry itself can be run largely by lay leaders. There is an economy built into this that comes from lay persons leading in the implementation of caregiving while the pastor plays a key role in such things as making referrals to Stephen Ministers and helping communicate about Stephen Ministry to the congregation. This combines the best of paid and volunteer support and strengthens the continuity in leadership essential to effective ministry.

The Need for Continuity

A member of the Stephen Ministries pastoral staff is an avid reader of church signs. One sign he noticed in front of a congregation listed the pastor's name as Reverend Leaving. Unfortunately, that could be the name of many pastors of small congregations. In describing continuity in the ministry of smaller congrega-

tions, Lyle Schaller says that,

. . . the continuity is not in the minister. It is in the people, in that sacred meeting place, in local traditions and shared experiences, in the caring, kinship and friendship ties, and in habit."⁴

Because of its focus on training local lay leaders, the Stephen Series is one way to deal with the turnover in the ministry of small churches. Schaller mentions the Stephen Series in his book about smaller congregations, recommending,

*Enroll [in the Stephen Series] . . . and ask them [Stephen Leaders] to train one-half of the members to serve as caregivers. That can be the most effective means of raising the level of quality in the small second-commandment church. The downside of this alternative is that small congregations with a high-quality caring ministry rarely remain small. They grow up out of that size bracket.*⁵

4. Finances

When considering the Stephen Series as a means to meet their caregiving goals, smaller congregations need to evaluate the benefits in relation to the costs of a comprehensive ministry system. The following factors are important to consider.

The Stephen Series offers a complete system that has a long track record of success. It enables congregations to do the ministry right the first time, thus avoiding costly false starts and major errors. The Stephen Series is like a franchise. Everything that is needed is included. There is no need to deal with the inevitable problems that come from having to

choose, mix, match, and harmonize several different programs in a cafeteria-style approach.

Trainers of Caregivers

The effective use of paid staff is another area to look at when evaluating the cost of the Stephen Series. The Stephen Series turns pastors and lay leaders of the con-

■ “Be like Jesus and spend much of your time with a handful of people who share your vision for the church.”

gregation into trainers of caregivers, which increases the leadership base and the amount of caregiving available. One pastor of a smaller congregation relates that for every hour he puts into the Stephen Series the congregation receives seven hours of one-to-one caregiving. Bill Easum adds:

*Be like Jesus and spend much of your time with a handful of people who share your vision for the church. If these people are not presently leaders, develop them into leaders and begin to put them in places where they can free up the church to experiment with new ministries. Nurture them as much as you can instead of spreading yourself too thin.*⁶

False starts have a cost as well. A congregation can try to patch together a caregiving ministry by attending several different workshops, ordering various training materials, and purchasing resources from Christian bookstores. These costs, plus the costs of staff time

spent trying to organize those resources into a coherent program, can be very high and still not result in a serviceable program.

5. Vision

A popular acronym in computer circles these days is WYSIWYG (pronounced “wiz zee wig”). It refers to the way computers can show on the screen what a document will look like in its final printed form. WYSIWYG stands for “What You See Is What You Get.”

One person looks at a small congregation and sees a difficult fight to keep the doors open and hold off decline. Another sees the same congregation as a place primed for ministry. For his book *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*, Ron Crandall studied one hundred smaller congregations and their pastors who had reversed a history of decline in spite of many obstacles. He reported that,

*When turnaround pastors are asked how they sidestep the obstacles, by far their number one answer is to teach and preach a new vision for serving God.*⁷

He goes on to explain that,

*Helping to impart a congregational vision is not the same as working out a strategic plan or writing a mission statement. It is more a matter of “seeing” things the way they are intended to be, and can be, and will be, by God’s grace.*⁸

In regard to the need for a compelling vision, smaller churches are no different from larger congregations. As with any congregation, smaller congregations can find reasons in their immediate circumstances to preserve the status quo and

excuses to stay within their comfort zone. With vision for what God can do, smaller congregations can find opportunities to push the edge of the envelope to implement new ministry and improve existing ministries.

Churches that focus on what **can** be done rather than what **can't** be done are churches that project higher expectations, produce quality ministry, and become more inviting and attractive to people who are looking for a church home.

WYSIWYG indeed!

The Need for Vision

Congregations that want to expand their mission and service must first look into the future and see that difference. They must see what is not real in order for it to become real. Vision is the key for inspiring ministry. In their book, *Raising Small Church Esteem*, Steven E. Burt and Hazel A. Roper report a case study of a congregation that found new vitality:

The pastor—in worship, in sermons, in newsletters and bulletins, in council and committee meetings, in conversations with individuals—constantly articulated, restated, reshaped, and painted pictures of the vision. But he did not stand alone. . . . An inspiring sense of purpose emerged: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, welcome the stranger. This was certainly more edifying than the old road they had taken: combating issues of institutional survival. People began to feel like they were part of a church again, a community of faith acting together to do the work of Christ.⁹

Place of Smaller Congregations

In an age dominated by images of the mega-church, small congregations are still the most numerous type of congregation in the United States. Small congregations hold a great attraction for many people and are an essential part of their communities. Will Stephen Ministry work in small congregations? The answer is yes, it can and does work extremely well in small congregations. Will it work in *our* congregation? The answer to that is really the same for any-sized church—every congregation needs to evaluate the Stephen Series based upon their own circumstances, staff, members, mission, and,

■ Will Stephen Ministry work in small congregations? The answer is yes . . .

very importantly, vision. The points outlined in this paper are meant to help small congregations through this examination process.

The first step for any congregation is to seek God's will for their ministry. God holds the master plan. Through study of the Scriptures, prayer, and open discussion among the members, a congregation can determine God's plan for them and then decide which way they can best proceed. If indeed God is calling you to caregiving ministry, you will find the Stephen Series a reliable tool to accomplish your goal.

MINISTRY ■ ACTION ■ PAPER

■ Notes

1 Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, Revised Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 222.

2 Lyle Schaller, *The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 111.

3 William Easum, *Net Results*, (Port Aransas, TX, January 1997), 15.

4 *The Small Membership Church: Scenarios for Tomorrow*, p. 34.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

6 *Net Results*, p. 15.

7 Ron Crandall, *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 68.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

9 Steven E. Burt and Hazel A. Roper, *Raising Small Church Esteem*, (New York City: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1992), p. 70.

■ A Word about MAPs

Just as maps help one choose direction, MAPs (Ministry Action Papers) from Stephen Ministries help congregations evaluate ministry options. Each MAP responds to questions pastors and church leaders ask about the ministry systems and materials of Stephen Ministries. The purpose of a MAP is to address a particular issue in a way that helps congregations choose the best tools to meet their ministry goals.

Stephen Ministries
2045 Innerbelt Business Center Drive
St. Louis, Missouri 63114-5765
Phone: 314/428-2600
Fax: 314/428-7888