

Tools and Tips for New Pastors at Small Congregations

Ideas for innovative ministry wherever you are.

Three things to remember the first time you meet the small congregation you are going to spend some weeks, months, or years serving/leading as pastor:

- God the Spirit was there long before you showed up and that Spirit has been at work forming a community of diverse persons, infusing worship with transcendence, overcoming chaos with order, and dispersing sufficient spiritual gifts. Attend to what is in front of you!
- The people in that small church already have significant lives, lives that are of as much worth to God as the lives of any person in any church of any size anywhere in the world. Nobody is more “created in the image of God” because they attend a larger church – the one you may aspire to serve/lead someday. No one is less a “sinner saved by grace” because they worship in crowds or where the elite hang out. These 30, 60, 90 souls before you deserve your best game.
- You are there to help advance the plot of this local story of God’s people. Maybe their future is closing with honor. Maybe it is a spectacular recovery. More likely it will be something in between, a constant fog of ambiguity pierced by an occasional glimpse of a path forward. Your assignment is to keep them moving in the direction of that glimpse.



The five best *non-religious* books to read if you expect to serve/lead small churches:

- George L. Armistead and Brian E. Small, *American Birding Association Field Guide to the Birds of Pennsylvania* (2015). There are extraordinary, complex, melodious, colorful, serendipitous creatures in your backyard. Grab a cup of coffee, listen and watch!

- Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (1996). There's something about smaller groups (less than 150) that is written into our make-up as humans.
- Steven S. Little, *The Seven Irrefutable Rules of Small Business* (2007). If your goal was not simply to become BIGGER, what other goals might you have?
- e.e. cummings, *100 Selected Poems* (1994). This poet (there are many others with a similar mission) refused to capitalize his name and coaxed us to become, “nobody but yourself in a world that's doing its best to make you somebody else.” It is message worth translating to small congregations.
- Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (1881). Maybe all the grand things we project about the church are some sort of cover for more basic psychological, economic, or political realities and we should quit pretending. Or maybe, those projections are a response to whispers from beyond us by the One who calls the church to be a blessing to the nations.

— *Dr. Lewis Parks* offers these insights and recommendations from his work with and research on smaller churches throughout his ministry.