

The grace of small things

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue



WordHouse in Sacramento, California, meets in houses, pubs, and coffeehouses to read scripture together and share from their lives. Photo by Jeff Richards.

Gathering in coffeehouses, huddling in homes, working around gardens, or converging in church basements, new church communities have sprung up across the nation. They have different means of social cohesion, focused variously on social justice, creation care, art, reading, or music, but most of them have one thing in common—their small size.

In the 1990s people talked about a church being “launched.” A launch event included talented musicians, drama teams, special guests, and a building. The church development committee would pour money into slick postcards and glossy advertisements, hoping that hundreds of people would show up and that worship “performances” would keep the church going. The pastor would jet to Willow Creek conferences not for theological insights but for pointers on how to grow a church bigger, faster. Then he’d return home and attempt to replicate the megachurch in his town.

Dangers lurked in this model. Many megachurches depended on a charismatic leader: if the pastor crashed and burned, so would the church. In addition, the governing body put in a lot of upfront funding, so if the church didn’t take off, denominational leaders became investment shy and said, “We tried starting a new church before, but we’re not very good at it.” But in many places the launching model persisted. People liked being a part of something big, new, and exciting, and they enjoyed the performances.

In the new millennium, many people imagine church as a small, deep, and creative community. They *plant* churches instead of launching them, acknowledging that we're initiating a process that takes time. A planter nurtures the soil by developing deep relationships instead of overlaying one formula for success onto a variety of contexts. The church is not usually building-centric but meets in whatever place is comfortable or available—coffeehouses and homes. The gathering is not performance-oriented; instead, worship involves everyone in planning liturgy, music, or art.

To understand the shift, one need only to step back and look at what happened in the larger society. Many areas of life show signs of small, creative, and deep community arising as a response to “bigger is better” consumerism.

Environmental activist Bill McKibben writes about the “bigger is better” mentality that drives much of American life. Big-box chains moved in and closed down the mom-and-pop stores that populated our downtowns. People began to drive longer distances to get to concrete block buildings with miles of aisles in order to find cheaper products and have more choices. Bookstores doubled and tripled in size and then moved online. Even quirky coffee shops became franchises, with tedious prints replacing local artists' paintings.

In the '90s we millennials heard stories about a time when kids performed plays at home and families gathered around their pianos, but we consumed our entertainment from TVs that kept growing in size and programming.

In following our individual channels, choices, and pursuits, we became more isolated. We became anxious, depressed, and exhausted and began to wonder if bigger was really better. Now something new is happening. Farmer's markets are springing up. People are turning off their televisions and creating their own stories on social media through status updates, blogs, and vlogs. People upcycle, knit, and quilt.

Those who grew up with big-box stores and megachurches are longing for small, deep, and creative communities. These worshipers reject a worship service where paid professionals entertain those attending and instead are committed to making liturgy, art, music, and relationships.

There are difficulties with starting churches in this way. For one thing, it's expensive to become a minister, with education and internship requirements, and small

communities can't afford minimum salary requirements and health-care costs. New churches must figure out how to support increasing expenses with less tithing income. Many of us wonder if we need to move to a more socialized system of pastoral compensation.

Another problem is that "bigger is better" expectations have led people to measure success by attendance. They do not always see small communities as viable. We may need to rethink what success means. Does every church need to be big? Does every church need longevity to be a faithful gathering?

The Spirit moves in coffeehouses, homes, gardens, and basements, and God's voice can be heard in the still and the small. The biggest challenge is learning how to nurture and support these slowly growing communities.