

Great and small: Small congregations, great churches

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

Being the pastor of a small church is hard work. I know; I was one once. And the rewards are relatively modest by anybody's standards. One of the most sobering experiences I ever had was a visit with college friends the summer after my installation as pastor of a 100-member congregation. My friends were five years into their careers with IBM and Xerox and doing very well, with split-level ranch houses in the suburbs, country club memberships, and lots of things my family could not afford and would not afford for the foreseeable future. They also had weekends off. My minimum salary barely paid for the groceries, and our little manse was built on a concrete slab, smelled like fuel oil from a mysterious leak in the furnace, and had a toilet that refused to flush when it rained.

When people talk about small churches they often start romanticizing or patronizing. Richard Bliese doesn't do either. What he does do is suggest a new way of thinking about small churches that goes beyond the yoked-parish model which spreads pastoral leadership among two or more small churches.

[Bliese points out](#) that the majority of the 400,000 Protestant congregations average 75 people in weekly attendance. Often that number is not enough to raise the money to pay the preacher and the fuel bill, let alone invest in mission. The result is often unhappiness and frustration on the part of both the pastor and the congregation and frequently an institutional inferiority complex and even guilt feelings. "We aren't growing—there must be something wrong with us."

Another simple truth about small churches is that many pastors learn most of what they know about being ministers from the people in small congregations. These congregations patiently help pastors learn to preach, to be pastoral, to understand a balance sheet, to become a public person in the community. It is, in every way, a shared ministry.

I know because I know what the people did in my first congregation. People like Mike and Edna—he was head usher and president of the trustees, she was the treasurer—and Alma and Velma gave with great generosity to the ministry of our church. For three years, I was a student pastor, present during the evening and on weekends. They were the ones who kept the church going. Bliese has a new name for the arrangement: bi-vocational pastorate.

The members of my first congregation also taught me a lesson that Bliese underscores: at the heart of the church are acts of worshiping together and eating together. We did a lot of both. It's embarrassing for me to recall now that I once tried to eliminate the men's spaghetti dinner because I thought it violated the denomination's stewardship aims. Don't rely on money-making schemes as a substitute for personal stewardship, I had been told. I didn't see until later that the dinner was fundamentally about friendship, community and being church. Happily, the spaghetti supper survived and outlived my pastorate. And when the local migrant workers needed a sponsoring institution for a summer remedial school, my little congregation stepped up, opened its doors and its heart.

Bliese has helped me rename and reclaim that group of saintly Christians. They were a "great church."