Life on the edge: A small church redefines its mission

by Richard H. Bliese in the July 12, 2003 issue

What is a great church? For many Americans, great is synonymous with large, volume equals vitality, quantity means quality. But a countertradition is quietly emerging. As more churches grow to stadium proportions, small congregations are coming to see their diminutive size as an asset for mission.

I had to learn this from experience in serving as part-time pastor of St. Andrew Lutheran Church on Chicago's southwest side. With 167 members and 98 in worship on a typical Sunday, St. Andrew is a small congregation. But then so are the majority of Protestant churches. Of the approximately 400,000 congregations in the U.S., between 51 and 60 percent average 75 in weekly attendance, a percentage that holds true across racial and class boundaries. Small churches are often defined as those with fewer than 100 in worship on any given Sunday.

Whereas the average Protestant congregation is small, the average Protestant goes to a large church. Half of American Protestants are members of the largest 15 percent of churches. One school of prophets continually warns us that the small church has little future. One church official put into words what many silently believe: "A small church can be defined as one in which the number of active members and the total annual budget are inadequate relative to organizational needs and expenses. It is a church struggling to pay its minister, heat its building, and find enough people to assume leadership responsibilities."

Yet small churches are not dinosaurs destined to lose the struggle for survival. And it is not true that small churches don't have the resources to do effective mission. As Carl Dudley writes, "When church size is measured by human relationships, the small church is the largest expression of the Christian faith." And David Ray reminds us that "small churches are the norm, primarily because many, many people still find them to be the right size in which to love God and neighbor. I expect they will continue to be the norm."

St. Andrew shares an all-too-common narrative about church growth and decline, and about how good Christians can build bad congregations. It is also a story of hope and renewal.

St. Andrew was founded in 1964 by a synodical outreach team. The area was growing fast and the future looked bright. The common wisdom of church developers at the time was simple: where there is a pool of white, middle-class, home-owning families with children, mainline churches are likely to grow, no matter what their theological orientation. If you build it, white middle-class folk will come.

According to this model, each congregation took a specific neighborhood as its designated mission area and built its facilities deep within housing developments, not on major streets or intersections. The result was that the church was hidden from the wider community. People were expected to walk to their neighborhood church (or drive a short distance), just as they had done when they lived in the city. But since that era mobility has rapidly increased. Surveys show that most Protestants will travel up to 30 minutes by car to attend church services.

In the 1970s five Lutheran denominations were in competition with each other. The church planters' goal was to place their particular "franchise" in growing suburbs. Within ten years of St. Andrew's founding there were eight Lutheran churches representing three different Lutheran church bodies within a five-mile radius. Today there are 40 Lutheran churches within a ten-mile radius, 28 of which are, like St. Andrew, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. When the ELCA was created out of a series of mergers in 1989, people were free to attend any Lutheran church they desired. Many moved from small congregations to larger ones. Small churches like St. Andrew were vulnerable.

Statistics tell part of the story: In 1979 church attendance had reached 160 at two services. A hundred children were coming to Sunday school. Ten years later only eight children were enrolled, five of them from the same family.

A devastating lack of mission also afflicted St. Andrew. Members understood their mission as, in the words of a church official, "providing a church home to Lutherans." "Find the Lutherans in the neighborhood and invite them to church," was the evangelistic cry. The church had little sense of ministry to the unchurched, the marginal, the poor, or to those who were not of northern European ancestry. The neighborhood changed, but St. Andrew didn't keep pace. Survival became the

church’s bottom line, its mission.

When I arrived in 1991 the congregation had 35 members in worship. I soon heard a laundry list of complaints: there was no choir, the council was exhausted, no one could remember the last “successful” stewardship program, all our neighbors were Catholic, bigger churches next door had better programs, and both the church building and the congregation were aging. To survive, St. Andrew needed to discover a vision suitable to its context.

Recent decades have given rise to many highly influential “teaching” churches which promise to help churches develop a vision. Chicago is a wonderful treasure chest of such congregations from all across the spectrum—Catholic, nondenominational, mainline and Pentecostal. But no matter how beneficial these churches are as models of mission, they are both a blessing and a curse for pastors of small congregations.

Pastors studying these churches often succumb to the myth that large, dynamic, growing churches are the healthy churches. Not only is bigger better, “growth” is obligatory. The myth of size assumes that small churches are de facto struggling, parochial, maintenance-oriented, at risk, and not able to compete in today’s church marketplace. “How do churches grow?” is the question that dominates the literature of church renewal, not “How are churches to be the church?”

Breaking the myth of size means realizing that small churches are not necessarily premature, illegitimate, malnourished or incomplete versions of “real” churches. Small congregations are the right size to be all that God calls a church to be.

Karl Rahner wrote that “the present situation of Christians can be characterized as that of a diaspora” (*Mission and Grace*, 1960). My experience is that smaller churches can more easily act as diaspora churches than bigger ones can. They are not, of course, always beacons of faithfulness. St. Andrew in 1991 was proof of that. Our church council used to joke that anyone who did not like organized religion would love our congregation. Besides being disorganized, St. Andrew was not especially faithful, effective, friendly or relevant. The greatest difficulty was admitting this to ourselves.

But my time at St. Andrew has taught me that small congregations can more easily go through processes of spiritual transformation than larger ones and can be made “free for real missionary adventure and apostolic self-confidence,” in Rahner’s

words.

Bigger congregations are almost always adept at tapping into significant cultural norms, values, movements and technology. This is their strength, but it is also their weakness. At least one reason for their growth is that they are culturally sensitive. They work hard to know their constituency, their area, their “target audience.” Some of the most popular workshops at any megachurch conference today are about how churches can offer culturally relevant worship, engage in culturally sensitive outreach or use culturally sensitive media. Bill Easum, a consultant to many growing churches, goes further than most in emphasizing the relationship between growing churches and culture when he advises, “Study more sociology than theology. Learn how people think and feel and how systems operate.” Few churches grow large by being countercultural or living on the margins.

Small churches are usually somewhat out of step with culture. They are, so to speak, sociologically challenged. This can be its own blessing. The small church tends to be shaped more by the dynamics of its own small Christian community than by the dominant culture. While this can separate some churches too much from society, it can also assist the small church in living on the margins of society, where opportunity for mission knocks. A small church can incarnate a particular way of living in the world learned from the margins. It can go places and risk ministries that larger churches would find undesirable or impossible.

If North America is now a mission field, this fact has tremendous implications for small congregations. Being on the margins can provide fresh opportunities for offering bold witness. It is often a better position for discovering mission than is the center. In scripture, faithfulness seldom comes from, or results in, large numbers or success. God often elects the small for extraordinary missionary service.

To become a church in mission St. Andrew had to let go of clericalism and convert the members into ministers; let go of the myth of size and develop a vision of what a small church can do; move beyond “coffee fellowship” in its conception of worship and food; and leave behind traditional notions of church in order to focus on the congregation’s mission on the margins.

St. Andrew had a bad case of clericalism. It placed its hope for renewal on the pastor. “We need a charismatic leader to turn this thing around” was the rallying cry. But it discovered that small churches can turn things around only if the people

take complete ownership of the church's administration and ministry.

"Since we can no longer afford a pastor, are we willing to do the ministry ourselves?" the congregational president asked. St. Andrew answered yes, and decided on a bi-vocational pastoral model for leadership. I took a part-time call to be the pastor (working between 15 and 20 hours a week). The people would do most of the work and ministry themselves.

I later discovered that a growing number of congregations have been using this model of the worker-priest—not only those that have only 35 to 60 at worship, but even those averaging an attendance of 75 to 125. Some churches have even abandoned the idea of having a full-time resident pastor in favor of having specialized leadership teams. These congregations are served by teams of three to five bi-vocational ministers. One carries the responsibility for preaching, another for the teaching ministry, a third for pastoral care and a fourth for administration, with perhaps a fifth responsible for evangelism and missions. The combined compensation for the team, including reimbursement for expenses, is usually less than the amount required to pay a full-time resident pastor.

This worker-priest or bi-vocational model soon became accepted at St. Andrew. No staff person works more than 15 to 20 hours per week. The question now is: How far is it possible to grow a church without full-time clergy? A second question follows: Will the congregation ever want to be "normal" again, with a full-time professional pastor, like the bigger congregations next door?

Since a shortage of pastors hovers over the future of many churches, small congregations will have to wait in line for full-time pastors, even if they possess the resources to support them. The bi-vocational pastorate may serve as a better model for congregational mission than the "two-point parish model" by which one pastor serves two congregations.

The fact that St. Andrew's turnaround began with a structural change rather than theological insight is typical of small churches. Solving a practical problem often fosters spiritual energy. This fermentation of spiritual activity at St. Andrew led to a second critical step, developing a vision for mission.

The congregation defined its mission within six months. Its members expected that I had the skills to articulate and carry it out. And I had to promise to stay for at least three years before they would accept the risks of working toward their vision.

When I evaluate St. Andrew's turnaround, two factors stand out. They are the same two factors that Nancy Ammerman, in her study of congregations and change, identifies as critical to congregational vibrancy: worshiping and eating. Whatever else church members do as they cope with change, they must worship well and eat together.

The goal of "worship and food" is, of course, to create genuine Christian community centered on the triune God. That requires meaningful worship, worship in which people sense God's presence and grace-filled activity. Similarly, rather than just supplying good food in the fellowship hall, one must provide meaningful opportunities for building and practicing Christian fellowship. We must create what has traditionally been called a "eucharistic community"—a Christian community that meets together around the supper, around bread and wine, around Christ's very presence in the community, and that becomes a sacramental presence of God's love and grace within the larger community.

To create an environment for genuine worship and fellowship, St. Andrew had to admit that "coffee fellowship" after worship, a grand old Lutheran tradition, was not sufficient to bring about genuine Christian fellowship. We discovered that Sunday mornings were completely insufficient to create anything close to what the Bible describes as koinonia. We began to nurture fellowship through various meaningful meals.

Now almost no activity takes place at St. Andrew without a significant stress on fellowship around food. "Don't let any opportunity for a meal slip by" has become our unwritten rule. These meals, at evening or small group gatherings, at council meetings and before and after worship services, are meaningful because they involve four critical dimensions: prayer, personal witness, Bible study and attending to tasks—all while eating.

Meaningful worship and meaningful meals are critical to any attempts at renewal, and one doesn't work well without the other. Never trust a Christian fellowship where Christians regularly worship together but don't like to eat together, or where they eat together but neglect worship.

St. Andrew has developed the following mission statement: "We are sent as a community of disciples and apostles to share God's love." Because we are "sent," we are a missional community, not a church focused on our own survival. Because

we are a community, not a collection of individuals, we work to promote fellowship. We explore together what it means to be disciples, followers of Jesus, the people of God. As apostles, we are sent and equipped to do God's mission, and our commitment is to a ministry of love.

This specific identity didn't emerge from a retreat, a seminar with a consultant, or even a very long council meeting. The process was messy. We made mistakes. But finally three specific areas of ministry emerged. We discovered each at the margins of our community, where other area congregations had done little or no work. Being a small congregation has made each of these ministries easier for us.

The first major emphasis was mission to seniors. As we studied our neighborhood we began to notice the high percentage of seniors living in their own homes but still in need of assistance. So we began our Senior Outreach Ministry. Today we help 70 seniors with everything from rides to the doctor's office to telephone reassurance. Twenty-two members of the congregation have been trained for this weekly ministry.

This ministry taught us that our call is to the neighborhood, not just to the church. Almost none of "our" seniors are members of the congregation. We also found that having people carry out the ministry was more rewarding than paying a pastor to do it. The strong community response to the ministry made the church known and respected.

Our second mission focus was to become an inclusive community of faith where whites, African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans can live out Christian community together. In 1991 St. Andrew was almost entirely white. Today about 20 percent of the congregation is made up of people of color from almost every ethnic tradition. Our goal is to increase that number to 35 percent within the next three years, a number that better reflects the community at large. This would be no small achievement for any church in Chicago's south suburbs, especially for a Lutheran one—a denomination not known for creating inclusive communities.

We have learned that building a multicultural community is as difficult as learning a new language. It is not for the faint of heart. It may, however, prove to be our congregation's best witness to a community where almost all other churches are ethnically or racially "pure."

Finally, our focus has turned toward outreach to the unchurched. In some ways, we cannot compete with the many big, dynamic, well-run churches in our area for the church shoppers. They would almost never choose us. So we decided to try to attract unchurched people. Our goal was to establish an atmosphere of hospitality for the unchurched. A special second service and an Alpha Bible study program became the cornerstones of this emphasis. Our mission focuses have changed our very identity as church. A new ethos about what it means to be church has emerged.

Barring a miracle, St. Andrew will never become a leading congregation numerically or financially. Having 160 in worship may be as far as it can go in numerical growth. St. Andrew will always be a neighborhood church increasingly surrounded by larger and larger congregations. That is the trend.

But I am convinced that the churches that will be most effective in recapturing their life as missional communities will discover their identities at the margins. And the communities that can best serve from the margins will almost always initially be small groups or small Christian churches like St. Andrew.