

“smallness”



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INTRODUCTION

“In the work of God, the day of small things is not to be despised. God often chooses weak instruments, to bring about mighty things.”

~ Zechariah 4 v 10

We live in a world of big things.

Big cars, big houses, big words and big churches. Somehow the idea established itself in our subconscious that for anything to be better, it has to be bigger, and although in many instances larger things also have their benefits, there are a number of dangers that forms part of the “bigger is always better” mentality.

The growing trend that we see in the world, is one that longs for a time before our love for size. There is an increasing affinity among an emerging generation for the simpler, shorter, cheaper and also smaller way of doing things.

For the first time people openly talk and argue about how to do things smaller, without diminishing our impact. The new questions that we hear are as follows: how can we, on a smaller scale, do more things that make us the most successful?

Everywhere in the world we see how businesses, artists, governments and churches start understanding, embracing and implimenting these movement to “the small”. Literature also abounds of this idea.

Leonard Sweet, referring to the differences in the Gutenberg based and Google based cultures, writes the following in his book, *Viral*¹:

“Gutenbergers can’t get over the idea that for a thing to be better, it has to be bigger. This mania applies to mega- malls, mega-churches, mega-evangelism, mega-thinking. For the same reason that Ralph Waldo Emerson wanted his essays to get to the “grandly simple”, Googler culture focuses on autonomous agents doing small things well. Simple, sacramental acts of suffering love are at the heart of every spirituality in the Google zeitgeist.”

Although this specific trend report focuses on how the latest trends influence spirituality and ‘being church’, the insights of leaders in the business world help us just as much to identify and name these tides.

1. Leonard Sweet, 2012. *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*.

Marketing and media guru, Seth Godin², describes these new winds as follows on his blog:

“Small means the founder makes a far greater percentage of the customer interactions. Small means the founder is close to the decisions that matter and can make them, quickly. Small is the new big because small gives you the flexibility to change the business model when your competition changes theirs.

Small means you can tell the truth on your blog.

Small means that you can answer email from your customers.

A small law firm or accounting firm or ad agency is succeeding because they're good, not because they're big. So smart small companies are happy to hire them.

A small restaurant has an owner who greets you by name.

A small church has a minister with the time to visit you in the hospital when you're sick.

Small is the new big only when the person running the small thinks big.

Don't wait. Get small. Think big.”

A strange interaction is at work here. We are expected to think smaller, in order to enlarge our impact. In the following few pages we are going to do an in-depth study about this phenomenon and emphasise a few practical points that can assist you in your ministry, congregation or non-profit organisation.

2. http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2005/06/small_is_the_ne.html

QUICK SURVEY *

CONCERNING THE AREAS OF **CHURCH, ART, BUSINESS** AND **RELAXATION**, WHICH STATEMENT DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE MOST?

* This statistic is the result of a quick survey that was done during July 2012 by 149 ekerk readers and respondents.



I prefer a **smaller and more personal space**, where the whole community has contact with one another and the experience fits my preference.



I prefer a **bigger organization and gathering**, where everyone fits in and where activities are more general than specific.

60% 40%

SMALL IS TOO MANY TIMES small IN THE CHURCH

Worldwide numbers are still one of the unwritten measuring instruments to be a successful church. Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey³ indicate that in the USA it has been a burning measuring instrument from the 1960s and they are of the opinion that the “post-Christian, neopagan, pluralistic context of the western world” assisted in creating this worldwide “market-driven” approach when it comes to success in the church. The size of any local congregation is in many studies used as barometer for successful or unsuccessful churches. In the midst of this stubborn perception a number of studies carried out by the Barna Organisation⁴ among other found that:

a. There are significant differences with regard to the typical member profile between smaller congregations (with 100 and less adult attendees of their services); medium-sized congregations (with between 301 and 999 adult attendees) and large churches (with a 1000 and more attendees). Smaller congregations in the USA attract more people from the lower income groups than larger churches. However, this study also found that adults under the age of 35 prefer smaller churches to large

churches. A reason for this is the young generation’s distrust in mega-structures and in church leaders from the so-called “Baby Boomer Generation.” Len Sweet also talks about this in his book *Viral* as indicated in the introduction. He refers to a Google and Gutenberg generation where the Google generation feels more at home in smaller communities that makes an impact.

- b. That so-called mega churches (with a thousand and more attendees) are more conservative with regard to Biblical dogma and principles than churches with a 100 or fewer stakeholders;
- c. That, while women in the USA have the highest percentage church attendance (53%), as well as the highest involvement in small groups and Bible study (60%); the attendees of larger churches by far have the biggest involvement in church activities compared to the attendees of smaller churches that are less involved.

Amidst interesting debates that Barna’s research in the USA has elicited around the question whether mega-churches are

3. Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, 2001. *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*.

4. www.barna.org

more true to the Word than smaller churches, numbers remain a significant factor when healthy or strong church is discussed. An unfounded perception is that “larger is better” with regard to being church. In his investigation into a dozen or more effective small congregations Shawn McMullen⁵ refers to a conversation with a pastor of a faith community that had a huge impact in a specific area:

“This man was having a profound impact on the people of his community. But when we sat on his front porch in the quiet of the evening, he talked about the discouragement he felt in his ministry. Many of his seminary classmates had gone on to serve larger congregations, and this made him feel as if he had failed. I sensed a similar feeling among some members of the congregation.

For lack of a better phrase, I would say this preacher and his church suffered from low self-esteem. In their thinking, because they weren’t big, they weren’t successful or healthy or effective.”

With regard to South Africa, declining numbers in traditional churches are often mentioned. In Andre Ungerer’s recent dissertation (2012)⁶ at the University of Pretoria he quotes a study of Dreyer (2009)⁷ where the decline in member numbers in the NG Church, Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Church between 1988 and 2008 is mentioned.

5. <http://shawnmcmullen.com/>

6. See table

7. See table

	DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH NGK MEMBERSHIP		REFORMED CHURCH (HERVORMENDE) NHKA MEMBERSHIP		REFORMED CHURCHES IN SA GKSA MEMBERSHIP	
	BAPTIZED	FULL MEMBER	BAPTIZED	FULL MEMBER	BAPTIZED	FULL MEMBER
	% DECLINE 1988-1998	24%	5,5%	25%	6%	23%
% DECLINE 1999-2008	20%	4,5%	20%	12%	23%	9%
DECLINE NUMBER	199 083	98 943	27 610	23 446	16 953	9 128

LARGE ISN'T SIMPLY *small* THAT GREW OUT OF PROPORTION

Conversations about church growth statistics such as the above are often linked with deterioration and stagnation. Without regarding numerical statistics as unimportant, the challenge still remains to look at 'being church' and Christian ministries from other points of view. An important point of view that is often neglected is that the difference between small and large does not only have a bearing on numeric numbers, but in different dynamics at work in smaller and larger faith communities, such as:

- Different management principles that are determined by the number of remunerated staff members; the number and size of buildings and other fixed assets or the number of ministries the church is involved in.
- Different expressions of faith in services and other gatherings that are facilitated by attendee numbers and the availability of full-time ministry leaders.
- Different spiritual leadership models and principles that are followed to effectively accompany smaller and larger faith communities to live out their vision and calling.
- Different cultures that are sometimes motivated by self-directed needs, for example that a large church with many

members and huge facilities will be a decisive expression of success in God's kingdom, or in contrast that a true community of believers can only be found in small family churches. Different expectations are also linked to spiritual leaders in ministries of different sizes, for example that they have to be professional experts with offices and fixed office hours in large churches, or shepherds in smaller churches that have to be available for their "flock" 24/7.

Small and large isn't necessarily two mutually exclusive options in the church where one is more right and the other less right. Numbers are never a barometer to any side for effectiveness in terms of the impact in the kingdom of God. Both have a rightful place if they are based on the norms and principles that Jesus formed the kingdom of God. It is nevertheless important to know about the different cultures in which faith is formed and expressed in churches and faith organisations of various sizes. Even if the different expectations linked to such faith communities are often implicit and unexpressed, they still are very real and can be experienced. It directly determines the happiness and self-realisation of spiritual leaders and members' involvement.

The need of many believers for more personal contact and caring are generally more attainable in smaller faith communities than in larger churches. The risk that a few individuals could “hijack” smaller churches to carry out their own ideas, or abuse their power on church boards, is sometimes larger in such communities. On the other hand more full-time staff members at larger churches often offer members bigger access to a wide variety of ministries that they can get involved in than at smaller churches.

It could also limit the practical contributions of other believers who would like to live out their talents at their local churches. Greater specialisation in larger churches enable ministers to concentrate to a large extent on their talents and only do what they regard as their calling, while ministers in smaller churches have to act as general spiritual practitioners. More personal contact in smaller faith communities again is a plus.

Smaller can also be regarded as more specialised. It makes me think of a book by Seth Godin, *Tribes⁸: We Need You to Lead Us* which teaches us that there is a variety of tribes visible in the world where the so-called “like-minded people” get together with one mutual goal. The result is a focussed group that brings about transformation and change more easily.



8. Set Godin, 2008. *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*

SOMETHING CAN STILL BE SAID FOR THAT SPECIAL NUMBER OF APPROXIMATELY 150

Maybe we should look the conversation about large and small from another context as well, namely that of social capacity. The English anthropologist, Robert Dunbar investigated different cultures through the centuries and noticed an interesting trend, namely that people have always had a capacity for real social relationships with approximately 150 other people. From primitive groups, to small settlements, to ancient army units, Dunbar came across this number. Never in the course of history was it possible for more than about 150 people to know each other personally or work efficiently in a team. (This number does not include people who have already died or with whom individuals currently have social relationships.) Personal loyalties and cohesion, as well as mutual caring cannot take place in larger groups. When groups exceed this “magic number” of about 150, natural division and spontaneous subdivisions often took place. (For the sake of completeness – many researchers investigated Dunbar’s theory and came up with other figures – anything from 100 to 290 as the maximum number of people with whom individuals can have a social relationship.)

The Search to Belong⁹ by Joseph R Meyers also teaches us something about the relationship between size and the value of belonging to an organisation or group. There are certain myths that state that more time, communication of the group’s purpose, a better personality and geographical location create the idea and feeling in people that they belong. However, Edward T Hall says that there are 4 spaces in which our personality, culture and communication are developed: public space, social space, personal space and intimate space. He furthermore states that each person can accommodate eight persons in the public space, four in the social space, two in the personal space and 1 in the intimate space. When harmony in the various separate groups develops, there is a mutual distribution of values.

If we bring the Dunbar number in line with the research of Edward T Hall¹⁰, it means that we can only find valuable meaning with 150 other persons. Of these 150 people 80 people are in your public space, 40 people are in your social space, 20 people are in your personal space and 10 people are in your intimate space.

9. Joseph R Meyers, 2003. The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups

10. <http://www.edwardthall.com/>

In view of Dunbar's and others' research, shouldn't we rather ask whether the church is making unrealistic demands to spiritual leaders who have to look after hundreds of members. Does this mean that larger churches have to be dissolved and that smaller groups are best? No, in this regard Malcolm Gladwell¹¹ refers to a huge multimillion dollar American company that bought into this principle of about 150 people per unit, namely Gore Associates in Newark, Delaware. By trial and error they divided their huge high technology business into smaller groups. No designations are used. They don't have any budgets or strategic plans. All the bosses were replaced by mentors. Special offices for executive personnel was exchanged for simple furnished spaces. Even if Gore Associates is a huge company it functions in numerous small groups of no larger than 150. This huge "small" organisation has just (in 2012) been nominated as one of the Fortune 100 Best Companies in the USA to work for, is doing very well without numerous management structures because group pressure and team work deliver much better results than hierarchical structures. Loyalty and the challenge to live up to each other's expectation and deliver top products, makes Gore a strong relationship-driven company.

We also read about the fashion world that is making use of smaller companies. An article in The Guardian¹² is of the opinion that it is easier as smaller organisations to be more

visionary with regard to their products. They are also small enough to be flexible, which is important in the diverse market conditions of the current economy. Larger companies such as Levi's cooperate with smaller companies to extract value from this "smallness". Instagram, which consists of a small number of staff members and was bought for 1\$ billion by Facebook should also be mentioned here. Josh Constance and Kim-Mai Cutler of Techcrunch¹³ puts it as follows:

"With the deal, Instagram will gain massive design and engineering resources by joining forces with Facebook, a big change after running as a famously lean company with just a handful of employees. Still, the deal seems to let Instagram stay somewhat independent and maintain some of its company culture. Instagram CEO Kevin Systrom writes in a blog post, "It's important to be clear that Instagram is not going away."

The company Best Buy¹⁴ in the USA consists of large concept shops. They closed 50 of their larger shops and opened 100 smaller shops in shopping centres. In this process they came up with the concept of "connected stores" where clients get one-on-one service on a more personal level. The reason for this decision is the beginning of the digital era. Best Buy realised that people do increasingly more transactions online and changed their DNA to fit in with the DNA of the digital era; smaller, more personal and transparent.

11. ...

12. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/blog/fashion-industry-trends-innovation-small-business?newsfeed=true>

13. <http://techcrunch.com/2012/04/09/facebook-to-acquire-instagram-for-1-billion/> & <http://blog.instagram.com/post/20785013897/instagram-facebook>

14. <http://www.newretailblog.com/as-mobiles-get-bigger-stores-get-smaller/> & <http://mashable.com/follow/videos/1536957463001-best-buy-announced-it-will-close-50-brick-and-mortar-stores-in-the-/>

If we look at South Africa we also see a trend towards smaller in markets. Handmade, personal and relationship driven trade is part of this trend of smallness. With the start of markets like Kamersvol Geskenke¹⁵, Hazelwood Food Market¹⁶, Neighbourhoods Market¹⁷, Market on Main¹⁸ and Die Pretoria Boeremark¹⁹ we see that there is a trend towards smaller communities. People prefer to buy fresh vegetables at a market rather than in a large supermarket. People often prefer to buy clothes and household decorations at a market rather than at the large shopping centre in town. The bonus is that you can build a relationship with the person you are buying from and that you can see and know where the product comes from. This is characteristic in the Google generation that Len Sweet talks about where people will gather in smaller, more personal groups and also acknowledge it as a social event.

Faith communities should take serious notice of the “Dunbar principle” and the trend of smallness. This demands a mind shift from “numbers equal success” to “impact in God’s kingdom is success.” When larger does not grow smaller, efficiency suffers. Put another way, if large services and gatherings do not activate smaller groups, large simple is ... just large. It would be worth our while to have another look at Jesus’s images for his followers, like sheep, lambs, children and babies (Matthew 18; John 10) – which all describe smallness and fragility. Or we could look at the early church

that chose to gather as decentralised smaller groups in houses in various cities. During the first three centuries Christianity nevertheless grew into a huge movement of millions upon millions of groups of individuals who were inspired by Christ’s love. Large churches and organisations could join hands with smaller organisations, churches and vice versa. Larger and smaller could be in a mutual assisting relationship. In various ways the large and small should join hands to make the best possible impact in the kingdom of God.

“Small is the new big and tall.”

But, large or small that is not effective in terms of the strength and deeper flow of God’s kingdom, is the wrong size every time!

15. <http://www.kamersvol.com/>

16. <http://www.hazelfoodmarket.co.za/>

17. <http://www.neighbourhoodsmarket.co.za/>

18. <http://marketonmain.co.za/>

19. <http://www.pretoriaboeremark.co.za/>

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