



Your Church Has Potential!

*"MEGA" NOT REQUIRED

By SHAWN McMULLEN

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

I love the church! Not just (just!?) the truly large Body of Christ, all of his people. And not just the huge congregations impressively big and wealthy. I especially love those scads of smaller gatherings of disciples who meet to glorify the Lord. Through the doors of the little church where I worship have come F-16 pilots and janitors, four-pound newborns and 103-year-old little ladies, an amazingly diverse group of folks who love the Lord and each other. Can only large churches be huge blessings? Christ's answer seems to be No!

—Curtis Shelburne
Managing Editor

THE CHRISTIAN APPEAL
(UPS 107-240)

September 2017, Vol. 66, No. 3. Owned and published monthly by CHRISTIAN APPEAL PUBLISHERS, INC., 2310 Anna Street, Amarillo, Texas 79106. Senior editor, Gene Shelburne. Managing editor, Curtis Shelburne. Consulting editor, David Langford. Subscriptions: Free, thanks to our donors, to all who request the magazine. Free monthly bundles to churches, Bible study groups, and ministries. Send all orders to Christian Appeal Publishers, Inc., 2310 Anna Street, Amarillo, Texas 79106. (Offer subject to issue and print-run availability.) Postmaster: Send address changes to 2310 Anna Street, Amarillo, Texas 79106. Periodical postage paid at Amarillo, Texas. © 2017 by Christian Appeal Publishers, Inc.

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By Shawn McMullen

If you are part of a small church, never forget that you are part of something big!



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“God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise; he has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong.”

The Apostle Paul
1 Corinthians 1

CHRISTIAN APPEAL

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For more than a dozen years, while working as the editor of a Christian publication, I served as the minister of the Church of Christ in Milan, Indiana.

Milan is a small, semi-rural community (population 1,816) nestled in the eastern edge of Ripley County. This little town is famous, although you might not have known it. In 1954, Milan's tiny high school (161 students) sent a team to the Indiana state high school basketball tournament to take on powerhouse Muncie Central. Milan won the state title with a heart-stopping last second shot by guard Bobby Plump.

Sports Illustrated listed this team among the top 20 teams of the 20th century. Indiana sports writers named this the Number One sports story in Indiana history. The team's success (they are the smallest team in history to win the state title) inspired the beloved basketball movie *Hoosiers*.

It's hard to miss the moral of

the story: you don't have to be big to be good.

That's true of churches, too. And it's a good thing, because predominantly we're a nation of smaller churches.

A study released by Barna Research reported that the typical church in America has an average worship attendance of 89 adults—that a full 60 percent of Protestant churches in our country are attended by 100 or fewer adults in worship. In fact, only 12 percent of American adults attend churches of 1,000 or more adults.

This is not to downplay the significance of larger churches. They're here to stay, and they play a vital role in the work of God's Kingdom. I thank God for larger churches and for those who lead and serve in them.

Still, smaller churches are in the majority in our country; and they are crucial to the advancement of God's Kingdom on earth. Barna

Your Church Has Potential!

observed, "Small churches play an important and valuable role in the religious landscape

of America. They reach millions of young adults who have no interest in a larger church setting. They have tremendous potential for building strong community, as well as spiritual foundations. And smaller churches often grow into larger churches once they develop significant internal leadership and creatively overcome their resource limitations."

If you're part of a smaller

church, you're part of something very, very big.

Your smaller church is an integral part of Christ's body—a valuable asset in God's Kingdom.

Don't forget that.

When you focus on an area of ministry and work diligently with your congregation to serve God and your community through that ministry, you—and thousands of others in thousands of churches throughout the world—are helping to accomplish God's purpose on earth.

You're part of the big picture, part of that "great multitude" who cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9-10).

—Shawn McMullen
*Unleashing the Potential of the
Smaller Church*

The Kidderminster Principle

Richard Baxter was a Puritan. Born in London in 1615, Baxter entered the ministry at the age of 26. He spent his early ministry years as an army chaplain, and the next 14 years (1647-

1661) ministering with a church in Kidderminster, Worcestershire, England. He had a passion for preaching. (He's well known

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for his maxim, “I preached as never sure to preach again; and as a dying man to dying men.”) He also had a passion for souls—every soul in his community, in fact.

“The church at Kidderminster became so full on the Lord’s Day that we had to build galleries to contain all the people.”



Kidderminster was a notoriously corrupt community and Baxter had his work cut out for him. Nevertheless, this small community was dramatically transformed during Baxter’s ministry.

In an article titled “Prayer Makes History,” writer David Smithers notes, “When Baxter arrived in Kidderminster it had a population of about 3,000 weavers who were reckless, ungodly, and content to remain that way. By the end of Baxter’s stay, the entire community was miraculously transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Writer Leonard Ravenhill observed, “The outcome of this contagious passion is best measured by Baxter’s own words: ‘To the praise of my gracious

Master . . . the church at Kidderminster became so full on the Lord’s Day that we had to build galleries to contain all the people. Our weekday meetings also were always full. On the

Lord’s Day all disorder became quite banished out of the town. As you passed along the streets on the Sabbath morning, you might hear a hundred households singing psalms at their family worship. In a word, when I came to Kidderminster, there was only about one family in a whole street that worshipped

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God and called upon His name. When I left, there were some streets where not a family did not do so. And though we had 600 communicants, there were not twelve in whose salvation I had not perfect confidence.”

Ravenhill adds, “As one writer expresses with beauty, ‘Through his preaching and the power of his holy life, the whole community was changed from a habitation of cruelty and immorality to a garden of true piety.’”

What does the ministry of a 17th century Puritan preacher have to do with you? Let me put it this way: If you’re part of a smaller church in America, it has everything to do with you! A simple principle couched in Baxter’s story has the potential to revolutionize your ministry, the church you serve, and the com-

munity where you live.

I call it “The Kidderminster Principle,” and it goes like this: Regardless of the location



Curtis Shelburne

or size of your church, you have the potential to engage in life-changing ministry that totally transforms your community. You don’t need to

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relocate. You don't need an advanced degree in church growth. You don't need additional staff. With God's help, you can begin right where you

are and make an eternal difference.

A Matter of Perspective

But let's back up for a moment. This is not a shallow pep talk for discouraged church leaders and volunteers. This is a call to many of you to keep doing what you've been doing—to stay where you are, commit to a long-term ministry, learn from others who have done the same, and impact your church and community for the cause of Christ.

In addition to my role as Director of Church Relations

with the Center for Church Leadership (www.centerfor-churchleadership.org), I am the minister of a smaller church in a small community, the Church

Regardless of the size of your church, you have the potential to engage in life-changing ministry.



of Christ in Vevay, Indiana. I also speak frequently in other churches, many of them smaller congregations. So if you're serving a smaller church, I know right where you're coming from.

Several years ago I held an evangelistic meeting for a smaller church in a small Midwestern community and stayed as a guest in the minister's home.

As we went about our work that week, I was amazed at how well this preacher knew the people in his town. When we

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sat on his front porch, people strolling by would stop and talk, usually expressing their appreciation to the preacher for his counsel or encouragement

during a difficult time. When we walked into a nearby diner for breakfast, the preacher stopped at every table (I'm not exaggerating!) and spoke to someone he knew.

A Profound Impact

This man was having a profound impact on the people in 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 secondary 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.

This man was having a profound impact on the people in his community, but he felt discouraged.



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.

I saw a different picture. I saw a man who loved the people in his church and community.

I saw a church and a community who loved the preacher. I saw good things happening in that ministry.

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Still, it's often very difficult to overcome the "smaller" stigma.

Transforming Our Communities

Consider the vital role thousands of smaller churches play in their communities across North America. In every community people need to know Jesus Christ. In every community people need to be discipled. They need to be connected to the fellowship of the saints. They need to be nurtured and loved and encouraged in their Christian faith. From weddings to funerals, from family problems to social concerns, from national crises to personal victories, people in every community need the ministry of the local church, no matter how small that community—or church—may be.

These needs speak to the importance of smaller churches in small communities across



Curtis Shelburne

the land. Still, many leaders and volunteers in smaller churches feel unimportant and ineffective.

Do you feel like that?

It doesn't have to be that

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imagine what he must have thought when he entered the community and saw how ungodly and profane its people were. Did he think about packing up and leaving? Did he despair over the difficult task ahead of him? Did he think he wasn't the man to do the job? I don't know what he thought, but I know he stayed. And that profane community was totally changed as a result.

It happened then and it can happen today.

What do you think would happen if leaders and volunteers in smaller churches all across North America made it their goal to transform their communities for Jesus Christ?

What if the folks in your church agreed to stick together, to love each other like family, and to do whatever it takes to carry out that simple plan?

Can you imagine the collective difference this would make across our country? Can you

way. We can change the way we feel about our ministries—and the way we go about them.

Richard Baxter remained in the village of Kidderminster for 14 years. I can only

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imagine how many lives would be transformed? How many families kept together? Can you imagine how many schools and school boards, how many town

and city councils—and subsequently community decisions—could be impacted across the nation by Christians and churches that chose to be salt and light to their communities?

Effective Churches Come in All Sizes

Time for some more basketball facts. Earl Boykins was one of the Denver Nuggets' best clutch performers. In a January 2005 game against the division-leading Seattle SuperSonics, Boykins nailed only one of six shots, a three-pointer, during his twenty-two minutes of game

time. But in overtime play Boykins hit four out of five shots from the field (including one three-pointer) and six out of seven from the free-throw

Consider the vital role thousands of smaller churches play in their communities across North America.



line. His tally of 15 points in an overtime period broke the previous 14-point NBA record held for twenty-one years by Indiana's Butch Carter.

Boykins' performance was impressive by

any standard—perhaps more so because at five feet five inches tall, he set this record as the shortest player in the NBA.

Earl Boykins had no control over his height—that's a matter of genetics. But he didn't let that keep him from his pursuit of excellence. He accepted his stature, put forth his best effort,

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and became an NBA star.

This principle applies to churches and ministries, too. If you're serving a smaller church, perhaps in a smaller com-

munity, don't let that stop you from seeing the big picture—the value of your ministry and the collective worth of your work for the kingdom of God.

You may not see an influx of new families into your community

or a steady stream of visitors in your worship services like churches located in rapidly growing regions of the country. But you can still excel in ministry.

You can be a healthy, vibrant, and effective congregation regardless of the size of your membership.

Only God can grow a church.

That's how it was on the Day of Pentecost. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"

If you're serving a smaller church, don't let that stop you from seeing the big picture—the value of your work for the kingdom.



(Acts 2:47).

That's how Paul saw it. He described Jesus as, "the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow"

(Colossians 2:19). He reminded a group of bickering believers, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7, emphases added).

Make no mistake. You and I

Your Church Has Potential!

do not grow the church. That's God's work. We can pray for growth. We can set the stage for growth. We can work for growth. But in the end, God alone

grows the church.

In many ways, that's why some churches grow large and some don't. You can factor in the vision of the leaders, the location of the building, the surrounding population, and a hundred other variables. And still it comes down to this. Churches grow because God causes them to grow.

If you're part of smaller congregation, there may be many reasons why your church hasn't experienced explosive growth. In fact, that may not be what God has in mind for your church.

I'm glad that we're hearing more about church health and less about church growth today. True, healthy churches grow (and church growth

is important), but who determines when a church is growing and when it is not? Is it simply a matter of attendance records? Membership rolls? Programs initiated? Or is there more to

church growth than what the eye can see?

Only God can grow a church. And he alone evaluates growth.

The Big Picture

If you're part of a smaller church, you are an integral part of Christ's body—a valuable cog in the wheel of God's

We can pray for growth, set the stage for growth, work for growth. But in the end, God alone grows the church.



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Kingdom. Don't forget that.

When you focus on an area of ministry and work diligently with your congregation to serve God and your community through that ministry, you—and thousands of others in thousands of churches throughout the world—are helping to accomplish God's purpose on earth.

You're part of the big picture.

I love the magnificent scene

John depicts in the book of Revelation of the people and activity surrounding the throne of God in Heaven.

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language,

standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and



John Gulley

were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Revelation 7:9-10).

Someday you and I will stand in the presence of God in Heaven, part of a vast,

Your Church Has Potential!

innumerable multitude. I look forward to that day.

But until then, I'm part


of a vast multitude on earth—a multitude of believers and churches (larger and smaller) living their lives to the glory of God.

What the good folks in my smaller church accomplish for the Kingdom may

not make the headlines, but collectively, with other saints and churches around the

world, we're doing something huge.

We're part of the big picture of God's very large Kingdom.

May God richly bless your efforts to unleash the potential of the church you love and serve. 

If you're part of a smaller church, you're an integral part of Christ's body, a valuable servant in the Kingdom.



Two fine books that Shawn McMullen has edited are *Unleashing the Potential of the Smaller Church* and *Releasing the Power of the Smaller Church*. These books are available at Amazon.com. We're pleased that Shawn will be the keynote speaker for Synago 2017! See our back cover page for details.

"It's Not Personal! It's Just Business!"



As personal as a Father's tears for his Son, Christ's church is not "just business."

By Curtis Shelburne

"It's not personal; it's business."

I first heard that cold phrase in the 1972 movie *The Godfather*. Mafia hoodlums would assure the fellow they were about to "off" that he should feel better about being "whacked" since the aforementioned whacking was "not personal; it's business."

With the Mafia, and with some cut-throat business, this attitude is no surprise. I never watched the show, but I'm told that

Donald Trump, long before he occupied his present residence, used this "not personal" phrase on his "reality" TV show *The Apprentice*.

In some settings, that attitude is, sadly, exactly the reality we expect. But surely we should never expect to find it as the reality in Christ's church.

I've seen some odd and interesting mottoes or

slogans below some of the church names on church signs, but I've not yet seen anything



John Gulley

quite this obvious: **CHRIST THE REDEEMER CHURCH: Where It's Not Personal; It's Business.**

No, I've not seen it on a sign, but when churches are tempted to sell out to our consumer culture and thus burn incense to our society's most popular gods, truth in advertising might argue for just such a sign.

In his fine book *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson tells of writing a letter to a pastoral colleague who was flirting with leaving his present flock for a very large church that was "more promising" and where he could "multiply his effectiveness." (All the usual pseudo-sanctified buzzwords.)

Be careful! Peterson warned. "Every time the church's leaders depersonalize, even a little, the worshipping/loving community, the gospel is weakened. And size is the great depersonalizer."

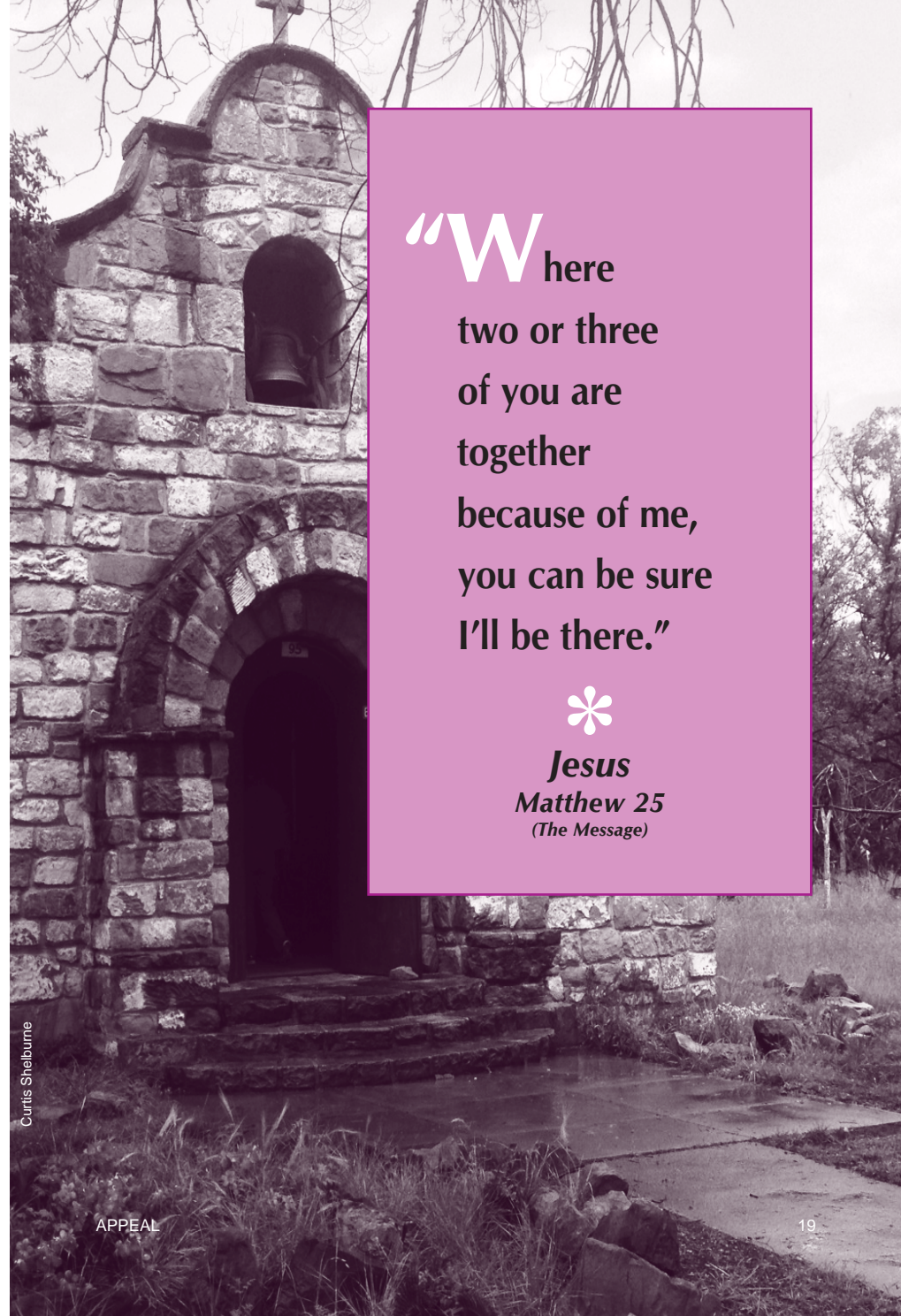
Peterson didn't deny that there is a time for ministers to move. He didn't deny that real spiritual maturity (the Christ-like sort, counter to our culture's values) can grow in large churches, but "only by strenuously going against the grain." Size makes spiritual growth harder, and not easier, he wrote, because real spiritual

growth always takes place in community, not in a crowd.

We easily fall, he warned, to the temptation Christ repudiated as Satan urged him to cast himself off the Temple so that angels might save him and crowds might marvel. When we go for the glitz, orchestrate excitement, and play to the faceless crowd, the ecstasy we seek from the crowd is as deadly to our souls as any false high we might seek through illicit drugs or sex. It's not the joy of God; it's false joy. And chugging its poison is tempting. It is much easier than adopting the way of the cross. It's much easier than actually living with, walking with, and caring for sheep who have faces we know. Small flocks are not without serious challenges, but they can also be great settings for amazing blessings.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, knows each of his sheep intimately and by name. Pastors and church leaders should, too.

Thank God, Christ's church is not business. It's as absolutely personal as a Father's tears at the death of his Son, as personal as a mighty God hearing the praises of the multitude of the faithful and recognizing and delighting in each voice.



“Where
two or three
of you are
together
because of me,
you can be sure
I'll be there.”



Jesus
Matthew 25
(The Message)



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