



The littlest birds sing the prettiest songs

Encouragement for small churches

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Introduction

Joseph of Arimathea was faithful to the cause of Christ when all seemed lost. There is a need for more people like him today.

For all the promise of his wonderful ministry, Jesus had been killed, and for most people it looked as if the Jesus movement had been killed off with him. But the Gospels recount how, after the crucifixion, Joseph and Nicodemus¹ went to Pontius Pilate and gained permission to take down the body of Christ from the cross, apply preservative spices, wrap it in strips of linen and lay it in the garden tomb.

And from there something astonishing occurred. Three days later Jesus was raised from the dead. The body of Christ was resurrected.

The NT often refers to a church as being the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12.28 etc. A church may be struggling. It may be on the point of closing. But maybe, under God, if we stay faithful to the church when all seems lost, things can change. As we pray, the same power that brought Jesus back from the dead is surely available today. God can raise and revitalize a dead or dying church.

The foundation of the truth

Why should we encourage small churches to keep going? The answer is because a local church is the foundation of truth in its community, 1 Timothy 3.15.

Psalm 11 speaks about ‘the foundations...being destroyed.’ The situation was dire and David was under pressure from well-meaning friends to cut and run. They were telling him that the position was hopeless. They said, ‘Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do’, Psalm 11.1b-3.

When we think about the foundations of a society being destroyed, we often think in terms of just laws and such things as an impartial judiciary being undermined. There is truth in that. But the NT tells us that when churches close, that too means that the foundations are being destroyed.

¹ John 19.38-42; Luke 23.50-54; Mark 15.42-47; Matthew 27.57-61

Interestingly, David's reaction in Psalm 11 is to rebuff the advice to cut and run. He says, 'In the LORD I take refuge' v1. 'And', (I paraphrase), 'if you take seriously that God Almighty is my protector, how can you give me such negative advice?' Things looked bleak, but David knew that 'the Lord is on his heavenly throne,'v4.

Sometimes it is right to withdraw from a hostile situation, Matthew 10.23. Sometimes it is right for small churches to close. But often we can rush to that conclusion rather too quickly. Perhaps those churches need encouraging. Perhaps they need a Joseph of Arimathea to tend to the body of Christ when there seems no hope.

But how do you encourage a small, struggling church? That is what this booklet is about. Perhaps that church just needs some encouragement until the Lord's time to raise it up again.

1: Small can be beautiful

What do I mean by a small church? Compared with the so-called mega-churches in the USA even the biggest conservative evangelical churches in the UK, with perhaps congregations of 500 people, are comparatively small. So, what is small?

I have in mind churches of less than 50 people in regular attendance.

Not too long ago I checked out the statistics of the FIEC,² to which many Bible churches belong. At that time, they had 575 churches as part of their group, of which 310 registered less than 35 members. So at least 54% of those churches would fall into my category of being a small church. And some churches have far fewer than 35 in regular attendance. The truth is that the majority of churches in the UK are small churches.

We tend to hear only about larger churches and pastors of larger churches. But, as we shall see, we should not despise small churches. Actually, they can be beautiful.

A beautiful church

There are two dominant pictures of the church in the NT. These are the picture of a church as a family and a local church as the body of Christ. When it comes to the practical workings of churches in ways that please the Lord, these pictures are at the forefront. When churches are like a family and act like a coordinated body with every member involved for the good of all, this is beautiful in God's sight. This is how he intended churches to be.

- *A family*

The members of a church are exhorted to have 'a sincere love for your brothers and sisters,' 1 Peter 1.22, and to 'be sympathetic and love as brothers and sisters', 1 Peter 3.8. Loving as brothers and sisters is one of the marks that we have truly passed from death to life, 1 John 3.14. And out of this matrix of family love within the church, a whole raft of beautiful 'one another' commands emerge in the NT. We are to forgive each other, honour each other, encourage each other and much more.³ Further, the leaders of a church are designated 'elders',

² The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches

³ Ephesians 4.32; Philippians 2.3; 1 Thessalonians 4.18

indicating they are mature members of the family who, having brought up their own earthly families well, will have a wise and fatherly care for the church family.⁴ The truth is that such a family attitude is very natural in a small church and far more difficult to maintain in a large church.

In Scripture, we find that the initial large congregation in Jerusalem soon failed to treat each other as close family. It was as the number of disciples increased, that certain widows were 'overlooked in the daily distribution of food,' Acts 6.1.

- *A body*

Because of the need for greater organization and the difficulties of communication with many more people, larger churches tend to go down the route of becoming professionalized. The church employs not simply a pastor but a whole staff of various kinds. There are assistants, secretaries, women's workers, children's and family workers, etc. Fairly soon church becomes something of a 'spectator sport' for ordinary church members as the professionals get on with the job.

But in the NT, church is participatory for everyone. 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us' Romans 12.4-6. Everyone has a positive part to play. The NT churches were full of amateurs, not professionals. Even the apostles were not professional religious leaders generally speaking. Only the apostle Paul could have been said to have 'been to Bible college', Acts 22.3. But all of them had been with Jesus, Acts 4.13. Again, it is simply structurally easier for a smaller church than a larger one to be participatory in the way the NT directs. When all the brothers and sisters support and help one another like different parts of the same body, this is beautiful in God's sight.

This does not mean that every small church is a beautiful church. Some of them can be dire for other reasons. But it does mean that small churches are less likely to distort the NT patterns which God wants to see in his churches.

While larger churches tend to function like businesses and to be professionalized and often quite 'political' in the way its leaders function, a smaller church can more readily be a family in which everyone is wanted, needed and known by

⁴ 1 Timothy 3.4,5

everyone else. And this is sweet in God's estimate.

Time for people

A couple of practical things immediately spring to mind in considering the beauty of small churches.

Small churches tend to have more time for people. A pastor of a smaller church has time to visit everyone and to pay attention to them. He can be a good shepherd who knows his sheep, John 10.3,4, 27. With this in mind, there are many stories I have come across of smaller churches becoming places of healing for broken Christians. They have found that they really mattered to the church and the pastor. This tangible expression of the love of God proved balm to their souls.

Again, sadly my experience is that when people have to move on from large churches, perhaps to go to college or with a move of job, they are easily forgotten. But such people are greatly missed by a smaller church and very often people keep in touch and help them through the challenges of a move. This is beautiful.

As in ornithology, the littlest birds sing the prettiest songs.

2: Why little churches need encouragement

It may seem obvious as to why, when you are just a small group, you need spiritual and emotional support. When we look around a congregation and there are relatively few people, we feel how vulnerable we are.

But it is worthwhile to spend a little more time on the question as to why, when we are small, we feel the need to be encouraged. There is some human psychology here which needs to be truffled out and addressed.

The world's spectacles

We tend to be discouraged when we are a small church because we see our situation through the world's pair of spectacles. The godless world has a certain way of seeing things which is not God's way of seeing things, and we naturally tend to see things the same way.

The world's culture is one which sees only what is big as worthwhile – only what is large as being important and worth investing in. To be big is to be significant. The modern world has adopted a whole vocabulary which supports and promotes this attitude. We find media and advertising speaking in terms of 'monster this' and 'mega that'. The latest action movie is trailed as a 'blockbuster'. Retail businesses speak in terms of 'the biggest ever sale' or 'giant reductions'. Fast food outlets tempt us by telling they will give us 'more for your money'. And this kind of language has its own message which subtly brainwashes us. The implication is that whatever is small is insignificant and is not worth bothering with. To be small is to be equated with being 'rubbish'. And this tends to shape the way we see things. 'Big is best' is the way the world's spectacles colour our perception.

We are reminded of the words of the pre-conversion Nebuchadnezzar. As he struts on the roof of his palace, he says to himself, 'Is not this great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty,' Daniel 4.30. But God did not see him or Babylon that way. God would humble him.

Mainstream church culture

Unfortunately, by-and-large, the church tends to see things the same way as the world does. 'Big churches matter. Small churches can close whenever they like.'

Christians too are attracted to what is big and glossy. For many churches, their idol is 'success' and by that they mean not necessarily a spiritual congregation but just a large congregation.

Sadly, I have sometimes come across larger churches even deriding smaller congregations. The arrogant pastor of the big church scores a cheap point from the pulpit by saying something like 'yes, they are sound – sound asleep!' (when he actually knows nothing of how they are striving for the Lord).

And so it is that little churches have a tendency to feel discouraged and of no account. Perhaps without ever expressing it audibly, they are saying to themselves, 'we're no good'.

God's way of seeing

But this 'big is best' attitude is not from God. If we just stand back and think for a moment, the point I am making is very obvious.

- *First*, look at creation. The universe which God brought into being, is vast, immeasurable. If you are thinking about what is big, Scripture asks 'Who has measured...or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?' Isaiah 40.12. It is beyond us. Only God can do it. Only the LORD can count the number of the stars, Psalm 147.4. We can't. And yet for all the vast immensity of the universe, there is just one tiny speck of a planet which is far more important in God's eyes than anything else. That is our planet earth. It is so small yet so loved. God doesn't wear the world's glasses.
- We see this *secondly*, from salvation. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' John 3.16. But when his Son, Jesus, came he was not in the category of big and glossy. He came as a baby into an ordinary family. And of our Saviour, Isaiah writes, 'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men...' Isaiah 53.2,3.

And God's different way of seeing, (he looks on the heart not the outward appearance, 1 Samuel 16.7) turns into warnings for those who covet being big and popular, Luke 6.26, John 6.66. Certainly, Jesus commends at least one small church. To the little church in Philadelphia, the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus

says, 'I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name,' Revelation 3.8.

Dangers of discouragement

Given the attitudes of the world, we can certainly understand smaller churches feeling sorry for themselves. But we need to be careful. The point is this: having a down on ourselves – simply because we are small – can be spiritually dangerous.

People in small churches may fall into thinking that 'God doesn't love us as much as those in the big church across town'. Negative thoughts can dominate. But being discouraged and continually feeling sorry for ourselves can make us grim and hard people. Yes, we struggle on for Christ, but with a chip on our shoulders. Love in the church disappears, and without love the church is nothing, 1 Corinthians 13.1-3. That's why a small church needs encouragement.

We may even become resentful against God himself. In Jesus' parable it is the man with less than everybody else, with just one talent, who gets himself into deep trouble as his bitterness leads him to believe that his master is a hard man, expecting a harvest where he did not sow, Matthew 25.24. Taking on such attitudes can be spiritually disastrous. That's why a small church needs encouragement.

Further, discouraged small churches sometimes react wrongly in trying to boost themselves. Into the pastor's sermons frequently creep denunciations of the failings of other churches in the area. It is an exercise in self-justification. You leave the service not so much thinking about Jesus as about everyone else's sins. Paul said, 'we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord', 2 Corinthians 4.5. A small church pastor can be tempted to do the exact opposite. He wants to think that he alone is faithful, only his church is sound. It is unloving and arrogant. That's why small churches need encouragement.

3: A theology of small things

So the first job for the pastor of a small church is to encourage the members. He needs to turn around this 'we're no good / God doesn't love us very much' syndrome which probably pervades their unspoken thoughts.

Some little churches feel that they are in such a low state that it's no good even trying to do any outreach. Faith is at a low ebb. 'What's the point?' they say to themselves, 'it won't get anywhere'. How can a faithful pastor to such a group begin to challenge and unravel such cynical self-talk?

Where to start?

The place to begin is always with God (not least in prayer). Get the little group of God's people to think again about the type of God that our God is. To be found in Scripture is what we might call 'a theology of the small'.

Summarizing the Bible's outlook, the famous opening question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism read as follows: 'Q: What is the chief end of man? A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.' God's glory is actually the purpose of all things – the whole of creation, visible and invisible, and of you and I. This is the fundamental axiom of Scriptural theology.

- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth', Gen. 1.1.
- 'For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen', Romans 11.36.
- 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it for the glory of God', 1 Corinthians 10.31.
- 'Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come...To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen', Revelation 1.4-6.

It is in the light of the glory of God that all churches, including small churches, have to start when they think about themselves.

Small and weak has big potential

As we read through Scripture, we find a theme emerges which is that what is small and weak has great potential to glorify God. God is at work all the time, Matthew 5.45, but sinful man has a tendency to ignore God and explain away his actions in terms of secondary causes. Therefore, the Lord often chooses to act in ways which are inexplicable simply in terms of what is 'natural'. With this in mind, he chooses frail and small things to bring about dynamic change, in order that his power is seen and the glory goes to him.

- Of Christ we read: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes', Psalm 118.22, 23.
- Of our salvation we read: 'You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly', Romans 5.6. Matthew Henry comments, 'God's time to help and save is when those that are to be saved are without strength, that his own power and grace may be the more magnified'.
- Of the early church, Paul writes: 'Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him...Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord,"' 1 Corinthians 1.26-31.
- Of his own apostolic ministry Paul tells us: 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us', 2 Corinthians 4.7.

And this outlook leads Paul to a mindset which the contemporary Christian churches might find very strange. He writes of his experience, 'But (the Lord) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in

weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong', 2 Corinthians 12.9,10.

This theology of the small meant that Paul's lack of strength did not cause him to be downcast, but rather to have hope. To be small is to be weak. But that is okay in God's way of doing things. Paul delighted in his weaknesses.

Paul and the 'super-apostles'

It was really this theology of the small – or perhaps more exactly, this theology of the cross – that caused Paul to clash with the so-called 'super-apostles', 2 Corinthians 11.5, who were trying to take over the church in Corinth.

These rather flashy, slick, professional preachers insisted that only what is big, impactful and glossy truly glorifies God. 'After all', they implied, 'if God is so glorious then he must be represented by preachers, ministry and churches which are impressive and magnificent in the eyes of the world'. But Paul called them 'false apostles, deceitful workmen', 2 Corinthians 11.13.

Paul's answer to the super-apostles was that true ministry in this world is not magnificent in the world's eyes. Rather, it imitates the ministry of Christ and the way of the cross of Christ. 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body...Therefore we do not lose heart,' 2 Corinthians 4.8-10, 13.

God glorifies himself through what is weak. He glorifies himself through what is frail and small. He glorifies himself through what is sneered at by the world, Luke 23.35, 36. 'Therefore', a small church pastor can tell his people, 'God can glorify himself through us'.

Here is how we can start to revive the hopes of a little fellowship.

4: Examples of how God likes to work

We have seen something of the theological theory of how God likes to use tiny, insignificant things and why he likes to do that.

But we find worked, practical examples of this same principle repeatedly throughout Biblical history. The people and incidents cited here are far from an exhaustive list, but they will serve to help us realize that this theme of God's use of and concern for the small and weak is not a side alley, but something of a main road running through Scripture.

Here are a few representative snapshots of who and what God uses for his glory. He uses small people, small numbers, small resources, small places.

Small people

God uses people that others write off as 'no-hopers'.

Think of Abraham and Sarah. It was God's intention to create an OT nation which would be his covenant people Israel and means of revealing himself to the world. But in order to begin a family from whom this nation would grow, he chose the most unlikely couple. He did not call a young and fit husband with a young and fit wife to fulfil his purposes. Instead, we read about Abraham that, 'he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about 100 years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead', Romans 4.19. God chose an elderly and impotent couple. Humanly speaking, for Abraham to become the father of a great nation, was not just a long shot, it was a total impossibility. But in many ways that was the point. When Isaac at last arrived, there was no question as to who had been at work. God had all the glory. It was a wonder that Abraham believed God, Romans 4.18, 20,21. But it was a miracle that the baby was born.

Think of David. When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse of Bethlehem to anoint the one who would be the next king of Israel, David was not even in the running. Jesse assembled all his manly looking sons, but little David was regarded as the runt of the litter who God could not possibly have in mind. When the prophet came, he had been sent into the fields to care for the sheep, 1 Samuel 16.11. Yet David was God's choice. And of course, later God showed that he was with him as little David felled the giant Goliath. David had delivered God's people from their great enemy. Here was confirmation that David would

be a true shepherd-king.

Small numbers

There is a saying that ‘God is usually on the side of the big squadrons against the small’.⁵ But whereas that might usually be the case, there are striking examples of the opposite in Scripture.

Think of Gideon. Gideon’s army was to face the huge host of the Midianites, Amalekites and others who had been terrorizing and impoverishing Israel for years, Judges 6.1-7.25. But there was a problem. Though far fewer in number than the enemy, Gideon’s army was too big for God to use. It is worth noting God’s logic in this situation. ‘The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her strength has saved her, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead’”, Judges 7.2,3. This reduced Gideon’s forces to 22,000. But this was still too many, Judges 7.4. Eventually God shrunk Gideon’s force down to just 300 soldiers. And with God’s guidance and the ploy of the trumpets, the firebrands and the smashed earthen jars, the oppressor was brought to panic and utterly defeated. God is jealous for his own glory and so likes to have the odds stacked against him.

Think of Jonathan and his armour-bearer. Perhaps someone is reading and thinking, ‘we have nowhere near 300 people in our church’. So let’s take another example – of just two. This time Israel was facing the Philistines. There was a stalemate as the armies faced each other across a deep ravine. But king Saul’s son Jonathan was a man of faith. ‘Jonathan said to his young armour-bearer, “Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving whether by many or by few’”, 1 Samuel 14.6. His young companion agreed and they climbed up to face the foe. God was with the two of them. As the soldiers of the Philistine outpost fell, panic struck the whole army and it soon turned into a rout. Mark Jonathan’s words. God can save by many *or by few*.⁶

⁵ Attributed to Comte de Bussy-Rabutin (1618-93). Both Voltaire and Napoleon are said to have voiced similar sayings.

³ It is worth also remembering the case of Samson who often stood alone, yet was used by God, Judges 15.11-17; 16.30.

Small resources

God is able to do far more than we could possibly imagine even with small resources, Ephesians 3.20,21.

Think of the feeding of the 5,000. The crowds were like sheep without a shepherd, Mark 6.34. The Lord Jesus taught them, but towards the end of the day the disciples recognized that the people needed refreshment. Jesus challenged them: 'You give them something to eat', Mark 6.37. All they had was five loaves and two fish. But under the blessing of the Lord Jesus, the green grass where the people sat down in groups, Mark 6.39, became the green pastures, Psalm 23.2, where the Lord our shepherd set a feast. The sparse fare was multiplied and all were fed – with 12 basketfuls to spare.

Think of the widows' gifts. In the OT we read of Elijah (through whom God's word came) being sustained as the little the widow of Zarephath had somehow never seemed to run out as she shared it with the prophet, 1 Kings 17.12-16. But in the NT we read of how pleasing such gifts are to God. When Jesus saw a poor widow put 2 small copper coins into the temple treasury he commented, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on', Luke 21.1-4.

Small places

Galilee was not a sought-after area to live in first century Palestine. It was something of a despised place. Yet Jesus performed most of his miracles there.

It is interesting to ask the question, 'where is Jesus recorded as raising the dead?' In our publicity hungry world, you would expect that he would do such things in Jerusalem. But instead, he chose three out of the way places. In Capernaum, a fishing village, he raised Jairus's daughter, Mark 6.41,42. In Nain, Jesus raised the widow's son from death, Luke 7.11-17. In Bethany, a village outside Jerusalem, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, John 11.18,43,44. None of these places were large or well-known.

Here is the question a little congregation can consider and be encouraged by: 'If God uses small people, small numbers, small resources and small places – then why not us?' If God is gracious to weak and sinful people like us, then he can work anywhere as we give ourselves to him.

5: Realism and patience

We should be very reluctant to close any church which seeks to be faithful to the gospel.

But sometimes churches have to close. This might be when the members, through age and infirmity, simply cannot carry on. And sometimes churches should close. When a church no longer holds 'to the trustworthy message as it has been taught' (by the apostles), Titus 1.9, it does more harm than good. And also, churches are in no fit condition to continue when the members are more concerned with pleasing themselves and keeping their traditions than with love for the lost or with the glory of God, cf. Romans 9.3; Philippians 1.18. This usually manifests itself in an unwillingness to allow any practical change.

But even when God's intention is to renew a small church, and the members seek God in prayer, things may not turn around immediately.

Waiting on God

We need to submit to God's sovereignty and wait upon him. When God blesses, he usually increases numbers, much to our encouragement. With this in mind, we might be tempted to think, 'Isn't remaining small a sign that God has yet to bless us?' The answer to that question is 'Yes' and 'No'. Even if nothing has changed except a new humble attitude and spiritual hunger for God to build up the church for his name's sake, that in itself is a sign of blessing.

God has his time. If you argue that only numbers mean blessing then we would have to conclude that for the first 30 years or so of his life the Lord Jesus saw 'no blessing'. But that would be a mistake, wouldn't it? Surely, God was preparing him and waiting the right time. Christ was faithful through all those years so that the 3 years of public ministry brought such an explosion of spiritual gains. Christ remained patient, waiting on God. And little fellowships must do the same.

The field, the seed and the climate

In 1 Corinthians 3.5-9 Paul speaks realistically about his own ministry. 'What after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord assigned each to his task. 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. The man who plants and the

man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field...'

Notice three elements here. There is the field, v9. This is the people of the church and the area. What is the state of the field? We can only take responsibility for our own hearts. Then there is the seed, v6. This is the message of the gospel. We know that the seed is good. But preachers and churches must take responsibility to sow it. But then, also, there is the climate. We can water all we like, but if there is no sunshine, there will be no photosynthesis going on and nothing will grow. The climate is in God's hands. And so is the spiritual climate. So we have to seek God and submit believingly to his sovereignty.

Of course, if there is no sowing there will be no reaping. But if a small church does do what it can to make Christ known then it should not beat itself up if there are no conversions. Only God can save people. Rather the church must pray. We must continue to sow and pray – patiently. That is how we wait.

God loves small things. He loves small churches and he can use them for his glory.

Strategies for small churches

Also, as we wait, we need Biblical wisdom. Among the saying of Agur in the book of Proverbs, there is a section which speaks about the wisdom of small things. Small churches would do well to think about the strategies of the little creatures which Agur mentions.

'Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; rock badgers are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in king's palaces', Proverbs 30.24-28.

It may be that Agur has chosen 4 creatures as a reminder of 'the four winds' or the 'four corners of the earth' to indicate that this wisdom for little things has a universal application. We can summarize the main thrust of how each creature compensates for its smallness and weakness as follows:

The ant – uses **anticipation** (forgive the pun). It stores up resources while it has opportunity. Maybe a small church without a pastor doesn't have much by way

of running costs. But its regular giving could be accumulated in order to be able to have enough to offer a man a full salary for 5 years to get the church restarted at the right time?

The rock badger – uses **location** to make itself secure. Of course, our ultimate secure dwelling place is God himself, Psalm 91. But maybe a small church's building is located in such a position in the town that it could be very useful to the local community. It can perhaps offer its facilities in order to make friends and links with people, which may later produce gospel fruit.

The locusts – utilize **organization** to make up for their individual smallness. We read much in the NT of the churches greeting and encouraging each other, e.g., Romans 16.5, 23. As small churches stand together, they strengthen each other. Someone has said, 'There is nothing a big church can do which small churches can't do in association with each other'.

The lizard – reminds us of **admission**. Though it is vulnerable and easily caught, yet it has access, admission, into the presence of the king. Whoever we are as Christians, whatever our circumstances, 'we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus' so we can 'draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...' Hebrews 10.19-22; Romans 5.1,2. Prayer must, of course, be a major part of the strategy of any church, large or small.

With reference to these four small creatures, Charles Bridges writes: 'Let us not be too proud to learn, or too careless to attend to, the humbling but most valuable lessons taught in this school of instruction'.⁷

*Now to him
who is able to do immeasurably more
than all we ask or imagine,
according to his power that is at work within us,
to him be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations,
for ever and ever!
Amen*

Ephesians 3.20,21.

⁷ *Proverbs, the Geneva Series of Commentaries*, by Charles Bridges, Banner of Truth, 1968, page 613

Appendix: The Dunbar number and churches

How big should a church get? There is, of course, no number laid down in Scripture. However, if your church does grow, under God's blessing, should you just let it grow *ad infinitum*? I want to suggest that once a church begins to find it difficult to operate as a true family where everyone has a part to play, it is time to think about whether to branch out and plant another church.

A telling sign

A fairly common and telling sign that a church needs to consider its future is once this kind of conversation occurs on a Sunday. Question: 'Hello, nice to see you. Is this your first time here?' Answer, 'No. I've been coming regularly for the last 6 months.' With the best will in the world, that doesn't sound very much like an NT church. Not long ago I was with a friend and 'by chance' we bumped into someone who went to the same church. I was surprised to find myself being asked, 'Would you introduce me to your friend?' They had been in the same largish church for around 6 years and, though they had seen each other, had never had a conversation. A church needs a team spirit across its membership. But this cannot be there when people have never even spoken to one another.

Social skills are important in maintaining the cohesion and purpose of a church. These do depend on the ability to recognize and understand other people. According to research, Dunbar's number, the natural upper limit to the number of people we can easily relate to in a group as human beings is around 150.

Historically, it was the average size of English villages. It is also the ideal size for church parishes, and is the size of the basic military unit, the company. Although an individual's social network may include many more people, 150 contacts marks the cognitive limit on those with whom we can maintain a stable social relationship involving trust and obligation with – move beyond 150 and people are mere acquaintances.⁸

Scattered for the gospel

We do find large congregations in Scripture. But in the OT, the gatherings of all Israel were only for special occasions, while weekly religious life revolved around households and village and town synagogues. In the NT we find that the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost, which soon multiplied to 5,000, ran into problems, and were soon scattered by persecution to carry the gospel into all the world, Acts 8.4; Acts 11.19.

⁸ <https://www.newscientist.com/definition/dunbars-number/>