



# LIFESIZE

A study guide to encourage groups from smaller churches to recognise their strengths, develop their relationships and serve their community

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### Note to Group Leaders

Before each session, please make a **copy** of the questions for that week so that each group member has a copy.

The paragraph printed in **bold** at the beginning of each session is a thought to open up your discussion evening.

Quotations referred to in the text are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

This study guide was first published in 2010 by the Baptist Union of Great Britain.  
ISBN 978-0-901472-80-9

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Every church is special. But those of us who have had the privilege of belonging to small churches have a particular fondness for them. The first church for which I had pastoral responsibility had eight members, and I will never forget the warmth and the happiness of that fellowship. The largest congregation we ever saw, whilst I was caring for them, was 19. How I longed for the 20th person to join us but they never arrived! The church was set in a small village community and its influence on the village was huge. It might have looked small to someone from a town but in kingdom terms it was a big church and many were blessed by it.

There are hundreds of small churches in the Baptist Union of Great Britain and I am keen for us to work hard at creating resources and ministries that will be able to strengthen those churches. I believe that this resource is of great significance and I hope that it will help to convince small churches that they are not alone, and that the issues that they face are ones which are being tackled throughout the Baptist Union.

Every period in history poses its own particular challenges to the church. Today is no different! The demands of legislation are huge and it is not possible, or legal, for churches to carry on in an informal way without reference to the demands of safeguarding procedures, financial accountability or the Charity Commission's requirements. We also live with massive financial pressures, and each local church must act as good stewards of God's resources, and that often leads to painful and difficult decisions. Added to that is the wave of secularization which has done so much to undermine the place of the Christian church in our society.

For all these reasons and many more we need one another. We might, at times, think that we would have preferred the challenges of another century. But those are idle thoughts and we need to face squarely the challenges of life in the 21st century. I am grateful to all those who have worked so carefully to prepare this resource, and I hope that, as you read it, you will be thoroughly encouraged in your work for the Lord.

**The Revd Jonathan Edwards**

General Secretary, Baptist Union of Great Britain (2006-2013)

Twenty-five years ago, the study *Half the Denomination* looked at the way that small churches operate and at the issues which many of them face. In 2004, the then Department for Research and Training in Mission was asked by the Baptist Union Council to take the lead in a new study of churches with a membership of 40 and under - just under a thousand of the Union's churches.

Questionnaires were sent to a sample of 150 individual small churches in rural, urban and other settings. The associations set up Focus Groups addressing key questions. Taking the results of the research, a Small Churches Implementation Group consisting of Mrs Helen Beaven, the Revd Steve Mantle, the Revd Carol Murray, Mr Peter Stockwell, Mrs Hilary Taylor, the Revd Ruth Wood and the Revd Dan Yarnell, took a number of recommendations to the Council ensuring that the voices from small churches were heard, seeking support for small churches in various ways and suggesting some resources. One resource was a paper *A Theology for a Small Church*, written by Dr Roy Kearsley, and the Revds Lynne Davis, John Singleton and Dan Yarnell. The main points of that paper have been developed into this resource called *LIFEs*ize, made to encourage the healthy life of the small church whatever its size and to help it look afresh at its local mission.

*LIFEs*ize is designed for use by a small group, or perhaps the whole church in a very small situation, with a group leader for whom this book has been planned. Each of the five sessions should take about an hour and so could be incorporated into five weeks of home groups. The session is introduced by a DVD, lasting about 10 minutes, followed by a discussion using the question sheet provided in this book for about 40 minutes, rounding off with a prayer time of about 10 minutes following the suggested prayer topics. The group leader is provided with notes that complement the DVD introduction. The discussion will flow more easily if the question pages are photocopied for each person in the group. Participants will also need a Bible and a pen for making brief notes. We suggest that a sixth week is planned so that the key responses from your discussions can be prayerfully reviewed and plans made to move forward anything the Holy Spirit has been laying on your hearts.

Thanks are expressed to Roy Kearsley of the South Wales Baptist College and John Singleton, Regional Minister in the Northern Baptist Association, for working with staff from the Mission Department in producing the text and DVD for *LIFEs*ize; to Ian Britton ([www.freefoto.com](http://www.freefoto.com)) and Mary Parker for filming and editing the DVD, and to Irene Britton for introducing each session. Everyone involved in producing this resource hopes that you will find it helpful in defining and putting into practice the vision of your church.

**The Revd Kathryn Morgan**

Mission Adviser, BUGB Mission Department (2008-2012)



## Small church – highly effective in the New Testament

**This session first of all seeks to dispel the idea that *small church* (let's say, less than forty members) is somehow not real, or *biblical*, or adequate church. The New Testament, however, is clear. *The first Christian groups met together in the low-key setting of home, friendship and community (Acts 2: 42, 46, Romans 16:5). As such, they were committed to each other and to the common meal, the teaching of Jesus through his first disciples and to loving fellowship with God through prayer.***

Most meeting places in New Testament times would offer limited accommodation compared to that of *church buildings* down the centuries until the present day. There's little archaeological evidence for any such consecrated buildings before the third century, let alone big ones. If fortunate enough, a church might have been able to meet in a wealthy believer's Roman-style villa, using the *atrium* (main downstairs lobby). The most common such building could perhaps have taken 20 comfortably, possibly 40 at a push<sup>1</sup>. Only in the larger premises of a very wealthy person might the attendance have reached as many as 100. But this was exceptional. The 120 on the day of Pentecost was probably such an occasion. So the fact is clear: at the dawn of the Christian era *small church* was *typical church*. And so it remained for a couple of centuries at least.

at the dawn of  
the Christian era,  
small church was  
typical church

The Bible does not stipulate *small church* for every time, situation and place, but all the same it points to this way of church as normal and healthy. And it is a challenging fact that in such small groups the faith first spread - just as it often does in places around the world today.

## Small church – built for mission

### A community for fellowship

The size and impersonal nature of modern corporations and institutions has triggered a desire in many for human company. Mobility in finding work has brought loneliness and isolation to large numbers of people. Hence we meet such trends as social networking on the internet, 'finding a tribe' and the much desired and sought after 'escape to the country'. Today, church is challenged to be a warm community of the Spirit on the biblical pattern where love and trust flourish and fulfil people's God-given character as social beings. Also, just as Pentecost sparked a wide range of gifts for service, so small church is well-fitted to make people feel a full part of the community, offering gifts that are needed.

small church is  
well-fitted to  
make people feel  
a full part of the  
community

<sup>1</sup> Paul Trebilco *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, Mohr Siebeck / Eerdmans 2007 pp 96-7

### A responsive community

Where small church cares for those within its environs, there can be a quick and sensitive response to local changes and crises without the complexity that goes with a large organisation. It is well placed to adapt its priorities and, say, to link in with neighbourhood needs and opportunities for 'being Christ' to people.

quick and  
sensitive  
response

### A creative community

Small church has to trim its commitments to limited resources. But its valuing of small, effective fellowship makes it suited to pioneering simple but radical forms of small church. Examples are café church, pub church, *Messy Church*<sup>2</sup> etc. Larger churches often think big projects, but small church can more smoothly move into less elaborate and more experimental forms of church life. These can be 'comfort' settings for many unchurched people.

pioneering simple  
but radical forms  
of small church

And when it comes to *growth*, small church can think more radically about that too. It does not need to be promoting ever inflating numbers in one congregation but perhaps aiming, where possible, to establish or inspire the emergence of further families or tight-knit communities of faith.

### Healthy small church – not completed perfection but honest humble quest

None of this is about *perfect* or *special* small church. Rather it affirms what can be true of *all* small churches serious about being salt and light, hope and relevance, doing and speaking the Good News of Jesus. Let two statements summarise the main points so far about small church: *small but true ...* and *true but pilgrim..* In other words, small church is to be church *aspiring to*, and *striving for*, the best. It is not (ever) perfect but, like larger churches, always in pursuit of walking the way of Jesus together and striving to show and speak good news – so small but authentic, and authentic but on a journey.

small but true ... true but pilgrim

2 Messy Church: Fresh ideas for building a Christ-centred community - see [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)

Space for your own notes



# 1 Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

**Please ensure that you cover all the questions printed in bold, and as many of the others as time allows.**

## 1 COMMUNITY (no more than 15 minutes on this section)

- a Think back to your childhood and describe the community in which you lived.**
- b In your neighbourhood, what words describe the community today?
- c In recent surveys, *loneliness* has often been at the top of the list of personal concerns. What reasons might there be for this response?
- d What are the needs in your community?**

## 2 SMALL CHURCH

Today, society is often described as *individualistic* and as having little sense of shared community life. This is very different from how the churches in the New Testament are portrayed.

**Read Acts 2:44-47**

- a Describe the characteristic of this small church that had just started in Jerusalem.**
- b How can a small church today make an impact on our individualistic society?
- c What difference does your church make to lonely people and others with needs in your area?
- d What advantages does a small church have when it comes to responding quickly to a community need?**

## 3 MISSION

New Testament churches were *small*. Even the church Paul wrote to in Rome was probably a number of small churches. Roman rule often provided a hostile environment, but Paul reminded the churches about following Jesus Christ in all they did and sharing the good news about him with others.

- a What similarities are there between New Testament times and today for the Christian church?**
- b How does your church share the good news of Jesus with others?
- c What do you think are the marks of a healthy small church?**



## Prayer

Spend a few moments praying together about individuals and groups of people in your area that are lonely or needy, as well of those in your church that particularly need prayer just now. Pray for particular church activities this week.

Then pray together:

**Almighty God, we thank you for sending Jesus to earth for our salvation. We acknowledge Jesus as the head of our church and thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit who still equips us to be your people. Help us to be followers of Jesus this week in all we do, think and say, both when we are together and when we are apart. Amen.**





## What is discipleship?

To some *discipleship* recalls the duty of attendance at church on Sunday and a period of the day to read the Bible and pray. But it might be helpful to think of these things as only *foundations* of discipleship, which is in itself much more.

## Whole life faith, a fully rounded discipleship

The word *church* has many associations. Some overtones are helpful but some can be misleading. The term too easily conjures up a well-planned hour or two on Sunday; but we have seen that *church* far exceeds such occasions, important as they are. Rather *church* is for the whole week. It is a community of people, each in their own life-setting, following Jesus with their hearts and whole lives every day. Disciples aim to serve God through dedicating every waking moment to Christ and his cause through 'ordinary' activities in work, home, family, leisure etc. The early church had to work this principle through even in a slave-culture (Eph 6:5-9).

'church' is for the whole week

Hence a disciple is not just someone signing up to attendance at church. Equally, the enjoyment of a weekly church public event does not alone make church a community of disciples, however important its place.

Paul was a disciple when not even able to go to church but instead languished in prison (though he quickly planted a church there!). Fixation on the church service or worship occasion, eclipsing all else, distracts from the calling of a community of disciples to be church through seven days a week.

So it seems that the aims of a small church are not primarily to provide a cycle of enjoyable activities for its own people and so end up in competition with big church and bigger resources. For, surely, disciples together are above all a tightly knit fellowship helping each other to live for Jesus and his way. *Church*, then, is this community sent out for service in the wider society. The people of God should be energised for this by the Spirit through worship, learning and praying together. As a result they can live prayerful, loving and different lives in the surrounding world. They bring the being, doing and speaking of Good News to a church's wider neighbourhood. It might also mean working with activists and advocates, or directly among the poor, or with those hurting in other ways.

For small church, whole church discipleship means acceptance of commitment to the church and a consequent cost in time. However, it springs from a fellowship of 'spurring each other on to love and good works' (Heb 10:24). This is the natural and happy dedication to discipleship that springs from being together for God.

whole church  
discipleship means  
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in time

## Regular interaction with the Scriptures

### The Sermon

Small churches sometimes lament the standard of the preaching or teaching they have to put up with. Perhaps they are understandably tempted to envy big congregations with especially able preachers or good teaching. But the key element in a thriving church is not always the quality of public *teachers* but the quality of *learning* together as disciples. Preaching or teaching is not an end in itself but a stage in learning. After all, our tradition of the professional sermon arose in the formal church life that developed long after the time of the New Testament church. Well done and passionately shared, it can indeed inspire people to follow in true discipleship. Moreover it sometimes motivates real church to live out the scriptures as a community together. Left to itself, however, it can also foster passivity and laziness in the hearers. It can make the experience of the sermon an end in itself (not the teacher's intention!) So much more is needed...

### Beyond the sermon: being round the Scriptures together

(see Heb 10:25)

A preacher's message is often, unreasonably, expected by listeners to impact equally on everyone. But one size doesn't always fit all. And the bigger the congregation, the harder this communication task is! Therefore, interactive, relational study of scripture with fellow-disciples can be life-changing beyond listening to a sermon once or twice a week. However, like the sermon, it aims at more than simply providing information. So it misses the point if it's just a way for the more experienced or better read to instruct the rest. Books and websites are there for that. Critically, the chief aims rather are to:

- » help a small group to learn together as equals with a variety of voices heard,
- » enable the sharing of different faith stories in a common spiritual journey,
- » foster mission and love for each other and for the world around,
- » help people take scripture seriously in real daily living,
- » help shape their relationships under scripture.

### Worship together

*Corporate worship* is connected to daily living for God which is the fullest form of worship (Romans 12:1,2). In group worship, people celebrate with joy and gratitude the new kind of rule that Jesus brings. They express together their strong love and loyalty towards Jesus as Lord and their esteem for God as creator without reserve. They therefore affirm each other's status as God's children. They rejoice in the coming of the rule of Jesus and exult over all good news and triumphs of justice and truth (such as fair-trade breakthroughs and revived churches). Baptism and communion, equally, are occasions for receiving divine grace to go on serving, and opportunities for self-dedication.

daily living for  
God ... the fullest  
form of worship

Surprisingly, not all think that corporate singing was a necessary part of the community's assembling, and, true, it was not part of the earliest, simple meetings of Acts 2. Many today indeed find it does enhance public praise but for others it is not essential. For the latter, the essentials seem to be love of God and God's ways, celebration of Messiah and self-dedication to the Lord. Hence, a church's meeting, small or big, should be hospitable and welcoming to those who come to it as strangers. Pleasure in God's worth is something we want to *share!*

Space for your own notes



## 2 Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

*Please ensure that you cover all the questions printed in bold, and as many of the others as time allows.*

### 1 WHOLE LIFE FAITH

- a **Think of people in your life that have been a positive influence on you.** Share some of the stories with each other. **What characteristic made these people special?**
- b Who are your Christian heroes? What marks them out as followers of Jesus?
- c **What does it mean to be a disciple today?**

### 2 REAL DISCIPLESHIP

#### Read Hebrews 10:19-25

- a Based on Christ's sacrifice and priesthood (v 19-21), what attitudes and actions follow?
- b **Look at the five 'let us' statements (v 22-25). For each one, say what it would mean in practice in your particular context. If one of those statements has special meaning for your group, then say it aloud together three times as a commitment together to follow it up.**

### 3 SUSTAINING WHOLE LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

#### Interacting with Scripture

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16,17)*

**Describe the ways in which you make use of scripture, either alone or together, that really help you in your daily life. Does it affect your mission?**

#### Praying

Remind each other how praying goes on in the life of your fellowship, individually, in small groups or as a whole church. Recall some answers to prayer. Are there any other means of praying or organising information for prayer that would help people?

#### Worshipping Together

**Why is worship important in sustaining our discipleship throughout the week?**

(We shall consider worship again in Session 4)

## 2. Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

### Prayer

Use Hebrews 10:19-25 as pointers for giving thanks to God. Pray for the times of coming together in the life of your church – think of the events in the coming week – asking that each person involved might grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Pray for what each person will be doing tomorrow, and for their Christian witness in that situation.

Then pray together:

**Loving God, we thank you that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have become your sons and daughters. Please help us to encourage one another in our discipleship as we meet together, and to walk in the way of Jesus every day of the week when we are apart. By the Holy Spirit, grant us strength to serve you and joy in being your disciples. Amen.**





## Life Together

**In the last session we focused on church as a community of disciples and on each person's discipleship in the wider world of service. However, discipleship is also corporate – a life together on a shared journey. That is sometimes called 'the way of Jesus', reflecting the early name for Christians as 'Followers of the Way' (eg Acts 22:4, 24:14 etc). This is not a loose affiliation as found in clubs and societies but a commitment of pilgrims to each other.**

## Church as Family

The New Testament speaks of an extended *family*, or household and it clearly involves many things, including:

- » a sharing of poverty, joys, pains, triumphs, defeats
- » powerful biblical metaphors, such as *body, people, family, exiles*
- » friendship, mutual service, participation
- » the sharing of risk
- » mission service together at the margins, possibly in edgy places just as Jesus served.

## A sacramental way of life

Baptism and communion: signs to strengthen us together on the shared journey. There are many symbols and signs in Christian tradition but two stand out as special in the broad tradition to which Baptists belong:

- » **Baptism** *signals and celebrates the joining of a journey on the way, in life together and depending on the Spirit*
- » **Communion** *signals the Spirit's nourishment of our life together on that journey*

However, in another sense, **church itself** also should be a *sign visible in the followers of the way as they share their journey with others*. For church should be *incarnational*, embodying the gospel where people are, bringing the life and grace of God to those who are not yet Christians. This especially shows Christ's love to people who are not connected to a church, including those who are,

- » in great need of compassion
- » trapped in cynicism or indifferent to suffering in the world
- » carrying hurts or other forms of *baggage*
- » sceptical about human love and about truth
- » socially isolated and maybe distrustful of all communities.



## Mission: A people of the Way through living embodiment and words of life

Church has good news to speak - but it can only speak these words as it is itself a sign and channel of God's love. People are being invaded by words every day through cold calls, emails, junk mail, posters and 24 hour news. All this is impersonal and treats receivers as consumers rather than people sharing a country or a planet. Hence bombardment of bare words can today leave people unresponsive.

They could be left:

### Cold:

- where people are unchallenged, untouched and indifferent to being the target of yet more impersonal messages.

Church has good  
news to speak

### Unengaged:

- where those hearing only receive shouted information and not a warm invitation backed up by the compelling signs of a community walking the way of its master Jesus.

### Disinterested:

- where hearers are not engaged or attracted by the life, relationships and values of the community that does the speaking.

### Dismissive:

- because the audience is already used to exaggerated claims for products and services. Not just words but impressive authenticity is needed to break through this deeply ingrained bias against salesmanship and information overload.

## Conclusion

This social dimension to being church involves at least two key activities which are relevant regardless of the size of church:

### Hospitality

Here church shows an openness and genuine welcome into the community life by visitors and strangers of many kinds – the *hostile*, the *puzzled*, the *doubting*, the *flippant*. Then even these can all feel they belong to the life of the community together because it has welcomed them just as a hospitable family welcomes an outsider, without preconditions, to the family table. If a small church does not have a building or the right kind of building (more of this later), this apparent deficiency is not the last word. For a people bound together in following the Jesus way are, as a group, *themselves* a place of safety and hospitality where people are affirmed in love.

### **Care**

Within the enfolding arms of such a welcome the newcomer finds a community, however imperfect, still seeking to be church. This is evidenced by the way it hurts to see all the broken lives and communities in the world, so mirroring the God who first does this in Jesus. And so this community:

- » is true church where being, doing and speaking of Good News express one single compelling love for people
- » is true church offering humble service in ever-changing fluid situations, sometimes tragic occasions or challenging ones in other ways.

Space for your own notes



## 3 Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

**Please ensure that you cover all the questions printed in bold, and as many of the others as time allows.**

### 1 CHURCH AS FAMILY

Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35)

- a From what you know about the small early churches we read about in the Acts of the Apostles, how did the disciples show they loved each other? What made the description of them as *family* appropriate?
- b In what ways can we express being *family* together as the local church today?**

### 2 BELONGING BEFORE BELIEVING BEFORE BEHAVING

Fifty years ago, most adults believed in Jesus Christ and were brought up with a biblical way of understanding how to behave. Nowadays, in our post-Christendom times, many people do not have this background. However, many are looking for somewhere to *belong*.

- a How can we encourage a sense of *belonging* to our church for people who start coming along this year?**
- b What difference does it make in the church that people coming regularly may have a sense of belonging and speaking about 'my church' before they come to a belief in Jesus, and before they seek to think and live according to Christ's teaching?

### 3 WELCOME AND WARMTH

Imagine you are a stranger who has never been into the building where your church meets and does not know anyone there. How would you know where to find the facilities, where coffee is served, what to do during the service? What would the welcome be like?

### 4 CHURCH AS A SIGN IN THE WORLD

In Acts, the groups of early followers of Jesus were known as 'People of the Way' because they embodied the good news of Jesus to others, and later 'Christians'.

**Read Acts 11:25-30.**

- a Compare the response of the church in Antioch to that of South London Tabernacle.**

- b When Jesus was on earth, his teaching in words was accompanied by acts of caring. Remind each other of examples of this. In what ways do you, collectively or individually, demonstrate God's love to other people in your wider community?**
- c Hospitality was a mark of the early church and is valued today. Are there ways that your church shows hospitality to the community? Could you do more?
- d 'The church becomes good news as it is good news.' Think of the ways that your church expresses care for those who are struggling in your community.

### Prayer

Spend a few moments praying together about individuals and groups of people in your area that are lonely or needy, as well as those in your church that would particularly value prayer just now. Pray for particular church activities this week.

Then pray together:

**Almighty God, we thank you for sending Jesus to earth for our salvation. We acknowledge Jesus as the head of our church and thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit who still equips us to be your people. Help us to be followers of Jesus this week in all we think, say and do, both when we are together and when we are apart. Amen.**





## Small Church in Context

**As we all know, church is affected today by many wider developments and situations. Some factors in church life come from the local setting such as the urban, suburban, rural, coastal etc. Others are much wider, such as economic, western culture, northern hemisphere interests, population movements etc. All such contexts usually have an impact on a church's life and mission, whether that church is aware of it or not. There are also other wider features, mentioned at the end of this section, such as the decline of formal membership in organisations. Below are several examples of all this.**

### **Small churches and the rural setting**

Small churches in rural settings find on occasion that words and actions, especially unusual ones, easily attract attention. This can bring demands for deciding a stance on local issues. Sometimes bringing people together can be a church's best role.

Similarly, pastoral discretion and confidentiality can earn respect in a setting where even a minor event can invade privacy. A rural church, however, might also need to overcome a tendency to conservatism, showing courage to do something new, particularly where a creative response can meet some desperate local need. That church might well become a beacon of good news and hope. It could turn out to be the only local community response or activity, giving it opportunity to be a catalyst for good and lasting change - and the opportunity to give expression to its message of hope.

### **Small church *Christendom*: Christianity 'sitting at the top table'**

Many Christians pine for a past when church leaders gave moral and spiritual pronouncements to which the country respectfully listened. This perception of the past may partly be rose-tinted nostalgia, but the passing of Christian privileges is certainly a fact of the 21st century.

Yet the loss of automatic access to public bodies, power and media has taught churches a healthy lesson. Good standing and respect must be earned through humble, loving service rather than expected as a right. Hence, many churches are returning to their roots and rediscovering Jesus as their model for mission in the world. His indifference to worldly power and his commitment to serving the poor and struggling are now becoming the benchmark for churches of many styles and types, small as well as big.

### **Small church and culture: *The Postmodern or late modern world***

It is common in our culture no longer to hold a collective world view based on the same shared story - for example, God as Father of all, a universal human family, the Golden Rule (do to others as you would have done to yourself) etc. In fact many assume that no such story is viable for holding individuals or groups together. For them, a totally confident worldview is impossible given the multiplicity of beliefs, religious and non-religious. What's more, the real sin now is trying to persuade anyone into holding such a world view (an activity sometimes

described as 'pushing it down your throat'). There is an irony here: people denying certainty, yet themselves being so sure of this ideology of uncertainty and suspicion. All the same, they will not be easily prised out of it by mere argument and words.

Some small churches, perhaps with limited resources, might feel vulnerable, puzzled or threatened by such an environment (as many big churches are). Postmodernity perhaps looks like a slight of their beliefs or as rejection of Christ. However, all should take comfort that Jesus still commands much respect and admiration today. In fact, 21st century attitudes mainly do not trade in hostility towards the Christian faith. Rather, they are concerned with personal freedoms and with the fear of imposed conformity.

In such a world suspicious of big claims, mere words or opinions do not cut much ice – and quite right too! We know that the early church was listened to because of its revolutionary new hope inspired by love, honesty, humility and compassion. So now, people respond to an authentic faith *experience*, and to Jesus-like *deeds* rather than just to bare statements or claims. This presents an opportunity more than a threat!

the early church  
was listened to  
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revolutionary  
new hope

### **Small church and this new situation**

Small churches have unexpected advantages suited to the 21st century, the era after *Christendom* and the *postmodern* age. In principle the small church today:

- » is able to adapt to the return of a New Testament pioneer situation, because it is used to every-member commitment
- » can reshape church free of institutional baggage and maybe of big church building fabric concerns
- » can live out simply the way of Jesus without complex organisational burdens
- » has an opportunity in crisis to become good news in a speedy, unhampered way
- » is able to respond quickly to such events because its *family members* know each other well and may earn fresh opportunity to speak the Good News as well as live it
- » can easily connect with people in its neighbourhood in a natural, personal manner.

### **Small church and decision-making**

In a world of less formal commitments to organisations, small church has particular challenges in this kind of co-operation:

- » Probably, being close-knit, a small church may want to maximise the contributions of all involved. This might mean widening decision-making beyond formal membership
- » Under pressure small church can easily lower its horizons. However, its future surely lies in a mind for mission rather than in prioritising bare survival with everything intact as before. At the heart of this will be a keen openness to change and to the stranger.

**Small church and associating with the wider family** (Acts 15: 1-14, 19, 22)

The associating of churches with each other belongs to the original Baptist conception of church. Preoccupation with its local problems can rob a small church of the collective resources of a wider family and the mutual help this enables (1 Cor 16: 1-4, Phil 2: 19-24 etc). A major lesson here is that associating activity between *big* and *small* requires openness by both to change and to an exchange of gifts in mutual equality.



Space for your own notes



## 4 Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

*Please ensure that you cover all the questions printed in bold, and as many of the others as time allows.*

### 1 UNDERSTANDING OUR CULTURAL SETTING

The survey of BUGB small churches showed that about 500 were in a rural setting. For all of us it is important that we understand the local context of our churches, especially in small communities where the church may be particularly closely watched and actions noted.

- a How would you describe the *context* of your church?
- b What do people in the community say about your church? How is your church perceived by *outsiders*, rightly or wrongly?
- c **Is there anything that needs to change to encourage more people to come along?**

### 2 POST-CHRISTENDOM

- a **Do you agree that *Post-Christendom* is the right description for our times? Why?**
- b If Christianity is no longer at the heart of our society in this country, compare this with New Testament times. Flick through the headings in your bible in Acts and recall some of the struggles and strengths of the small churches described there.
- c What can be the advantages of a small church in relating to changing situations?

### 3 RELATIONSHIPS

**Read Acts 15: 1-14, 19, 22**

- a The members of your church are responsible for its ongoing life. Are there ways in which others can be involved in discussions within the decision-making process?
- b **In Acts 15 we have the first example of churches meeting together to decide on doctrine and a mission strategy. What are the advantages of Baptist churches being linked together in associations today?**
- c **Some small churches have formed a partnership with one or more nearby small Baptist churches; others have formed a relationship with a larger church. What might the advantages be in either arrangement? What values would be important in such relationships?**
- d Is there something to be gained from a partnership with a nearby church of another denomination, for some shared mission activity? What activity? What about partnering with a charitable agency?
- e **If you are not in an association small church network, how might that be helpful?**

- f Is this a good time to ask your association to help you in running a Mission Consultancy in your church?

### Prayer

Pray for your particular church setting, rural or otherwise. Give thanks for the positive aspects and pray for the issues. Pray for your church's relationship with the local community and for its ability to adapt to changing times. Pray for other relationships you would like to develop.

Then pray together:

**Triune God, we thank you for the good relationships that we have within our church and we pray for the connections we have with other people in our community. We ask your help in building mutually beneficial relationships that will serve your Kingdom and that will help us in responding to our changing society. We pray for the other churches in this area and for the Baptist churches in this association. Amen.**





## Early church had no sacred buildings!

**As Session 1 noted, the earliest churches had no dedicated space for at least two hundred years. People met in homes, under trees, in caves, even in the atrium, being a busy domestic thoroughfare. The *visible presence* of Christ and church occurred through good news in loving deeds and loving word. And, as we have suggested already, that carrying of Christ's presence still extends today far beyond church activities, reaching to everyday activities in home, family, leisure and work.**

## Buildings may have sacred memories and associations

Today, a building may nevertheless still be cherished for evoking precious memories of such things as personal or shared spiritual experiences, occasions for mission, moments of recovered hope, or shared pains and joys. Such recollections can make a particular place in a sense 'holy'. This does not in itself require that such space can now only be used for so called 'holy' activities or itself declared 'precious' and 'holy'.

## The breadth of the word *sacred*?

The appropriate status of what some Baptists like to call the *sanctuary* therefore raises important questions. Many smaller churches with limited property have made this area multi-purpose. So through the week it brings God's compassion into people's lives; respite to single mothers; a safe place for children after school; a healthy meeting and activity point for teenagers; support for hard-pressed self-help groups, and so on. Here 'sacred' can define a space where lives are saved and healed, the broken mended, the despairing given hope. Some would say this is the highest meaning to *sacred space*.

sacred space

The restrictions of conservation bodies may force the use of the largest and most valuable space in a church building exclusively for collective worship. However, a small church should at least ask the question: could this room be more fully deployed for mission and service to a needy world, bringing the good news to others in action and word?

Many have found that a creative approach to a multi-purpose room can ensure an environment that still enhances worship. After all, new churches without a property at all, worship together in rooms borrowed from schools and community centres.

Today, people visit the Holy Land, going to places where Jesus taught and walked. This is often a life-changing experience. However, before consecrated sites and pilgrimages appeared, Jesus made these locations sacred. For in these spaces people found forgiveness, healing from disease, food to eat, an affirming love and transformed lives.

before consecrated sites and pilgrimages appeared, Jesus made these locations sacred

### **Buildings may also contain spaces dedicated to spiritual retreat**

Despite what is said above, there is still a case to be made for a dedicated chapel or a prayer room. If practicable, such a place could be in heavy use, giving opportunities for quietness, spiritual renewal, intercession, worship - and also mental and spiritual preparation for service and mission in the world. Aesthetic and creative gifts shine in such spaces and make it much valued whether by believers or others. It then does, on a smaller scale, work typical of a large cathedral space or places of pilgrimage and remembrance. This way it might serve the wider community in the same way that many rural churches are daily visited by the public.

### **Conclusion**

Three important conclusions flow for small churches:

#### *Buildings are servants not masters*

Buildings are a church's investment in the service of God. Church is not, of course, the building but the community on the Jesus way, set apart for God and doing the works of Jesus. Hence, stewardship of a building fails God if it short-changes the **un**churched.

For the same reason, no church exists primarily to maintain an historic building or a building's history, good as these things often are. Church is above all a *community* walking the way of Jesus together and carrying good news. This way it is freed from the burden of physically keeping the doors open. Church is instead liberated to be a steward of God's grace. This is particularly relevant to some small churches left with a big building. Some have simply given up the great structure which is such a drain on time and money, and started again just as their forbears did, either in a school or small property. Others have transformed a large building in partnership with others, so giving it up in a different way, by sharing it.

Church is above all a community walking the way of Jesus together and carrying good news

#### *Use of buildings should never suggest a dualism between ordinary and sacred*

The dedicated prayer room or chapel inspires people to service in the world. It helps people to go out to their daily work and fulfill Bonhoeffer's saying that Christ is not to be found in another world but at the very centre of this one. The rhythms of worship and meeting send people forward in confident, happy service. Everyone who does the will of God goes around creating *holy space* where Jesus is seen and remembered.

#### *Buildings should serve mission and not be appropriated exclusively for church members*

So church is a custodian of mission not the curator of a museum. Small church may often be specially positioned for embracing this challenge. Its identity does not depend on an imposing edifice and it can concentrate instead on making the building a means to an end. If a small church has a building far too large for it, the time may have come to reconsider which are the burdens God really wants it to bear.

Space for your own notes



## 5 Discussion Questions (about 40 minutes)

*Please ensure that you cover all the questions printed in bold, and as many of the others as time allows.*

### 1 SACRED BUILDINGS AND SPACE

- a Make a list of positives and negatives about your church building or your regular place of meeting if you use a community space.
- b What aspects of your building(s) encourage worship, helping people realise the presence of God?**

If you have your own church building....

- c Does your church building evoke memories and associations of spiritual experiences for you? Share these with others.
- d Are you able to have part of your building open as a quiet space regularly?

### 2 BUILDINGS FOR MISSION

- a 'Buildings are servants not masters'. In what way is this true and not true for the building you use?**
- b Do your building and notice boards give a positive image of God and the church?
- c What other local community spaces could you possibly use for mission?

If you have your own church building....

- d If your building is used by others in the community, how do you relate to those people? How could you make more contact with those groups?**
- e Are there any modifications that would make the building more 'fit for purpose'?

### 3 PRESSING ON

**Read Acts 20: 17-24**

- a What characterised Paul's discipleship during the time in Ephesus? (v18-20)
- b The logo of the Baptist Union carries the words *encouraging missionary disciples*. What does it mean to be a missionary disciple in our local setting? In what ways can we encourage and help each other to be missionary disciples today, using all the opportunities where God has placed us each day?**
- c In v21, Paul speaks about sharing the gospel with Jews and Greeks. What is the significance of this? What would be the equivalent groups for you today?

- d Paul set off towards Jerusalem with an expectancy of difficulties but compelled by the Holy Spirit. His desire was to 'finish the race'. Spend some time quietly thinking about where you are in your race of doing God's will. Are you in the front of the pack, one of the stragglers, or an onlooker? If you feel able, share what God is saying to you.**

#### **4 NEXT WEEK**

**Session 6 is for you to plan yourselves. Give items to your leader of issues you want to pick up from *LIFEs*ize to talk and pray about. These should focus on possible areas for action to help your church move forward in its mission for God.**

#### **Prayer**

Give thanks for the buildings that you have or use. Pray for any particular issues about those buildings. Pray for the groups, church people or others, that use them.

Then pray together:

**Loving God, we thank you for the people in this church in the past who have provided buildings and have been witnesses for you in this area. As we think of the present time, please help us by your Holy Spirit to be missionary disciples where we are and to complete the task you have given us. Amen.**





*The Big Picture for Small Churches and Large Ones Too!: How to thrive and survive as a small congregation*

John Benton

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