

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: The Demise of the Middle-Sized Church

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PAPER: 2011-04

REVIEW DATE: January 2011

When I was growing up, we used to do our grocery shopping at the local Four Square store. We used to walk there and back because the store was just down the road from our house. Mr. Dunlop, the store owner, probably knew – by face if not by name – most of the people who shopped there regularly. The greengrocer was in the same group of three shops. Very rarely would we shop anywhere other than these two stores for our groceries. Our hardware came from another local store, where nails were measured out for you by weight rather than being sealed in a convenience pak.

Ah the halcyon days! (Some might say!) But where do you shop today?

If you're like 90% of your neighbours, you shop in a supermarket or shopping complex at which you can purchase all your regular home requirements – and, in addition, potted plants, motor vehicles requirements, furniture, fabrics, clothing, etc, etc. You don't even need to go to the bank – because electronic funds transfer lets you access your account from the checkout.

Why have things gone this way? It's because the market research people employed by the shopping chains have detected a continuing change in our society. Once people used to be limited to their local area and often had to be content to accept a kind of "what you see is what you get" approach to shopping. Gradually, over the last thirty or so years, all that has changed. Today people are very mobile and increasingly are looking for a high degree choice and (simultaneously) high quality – in goods, service and environment. This high choice and high quality expectation is especially marked amongst people under 45 years of age. The shopping complexes, the department stores and the supermarkets provide this. They provide high choice. (That slack-jawed vague stare observed most often on the faces of men in supermarkets is actually a symptom of over-choice!) And simultaneously, they provide high quality. High turnover means that their goods remain fresh; managers ensure that their personnel are well trained and courteous; their facilities are clean, well lit, soothed by soft music and have adequate parking and good washroom facilities. Let them neglect any of these things and they soon hit a downturn.

What has this to do with evangelism? Just this, the same desire for high choice and high quality which directs today's shoppers also affects the way people look at churches – and the local church is still the prime organization for evangelism.

(I'm not saying that there is no place for denominational agencies or para-church organizations in the work of evangelism but it needs to be said that they cannot and will not replace the local church and for one reason – they cannot offer authentic community which is essential to and an expression of faith in Jesus Christ.) This demand for simultaneous high choice and high quality faces most local churches with a radical decision – to grow larger or to grow smaller. Let me explain.

Small churches (30 to 70 people average Sunday attendance) can do some things very well.

- They provide a close knit fellowship which, though it may be hard to break into initially, offers faithful and genuine care for its members.
- They can offer one well (sometimes very well) executed worship service. This service can provide a good basis for evangelism amongst people who are attracted by that form of worship – whether traditional or contemporary.
- In that they can be well served by one minister and one part-time secretary, they can offer an excellent standard of personal pastoral care.
- They can function as an excellent auxiliary to the various mission units in the area (such as shelters, food banks, or counselling services).

All this means there is a place for smaller churches. But to return to my shopping analogy, smaller churches function like boutique stores – they can offer one product to a select group of people. If the product is what people are looking for then they can do very well and fill important needs. Smaller churches can provide for the discovery and exercise of faith in the context of close community. In many ways they're like large families – and many people today are looking for and need this sense of family.

Smaller churches provide a sense of family and can offer one style of worship done well. Larger churches can provide for the high choice and the high quality expectation of the generations presently missing from our churches. The real rub is this. Middle size churches do neither very well. They provide neither the intimacy of a large family nor the high choice of a larger church.

If this is correct, it means that many of our church are faced with a critical decision – to grow larger or to grow smaller. Unfortunately, I suspect that most congregations will make the decision by default – slow decline will bring them to a point of no return.

What are the implications of all this? Here are just a few.

For middle sized churches that decide to grow, long tenured clergy who can provide ongoing visionary leadership are required (I would suggest at least ten years). It requires tenacity and teamwork; it requires an orientation of all the church's assets toward a future in which the church can have a vastly increased impact for the Reign of God. Turning around a congregation is akin to turning around an oil tanker – it takes a long time and huge continuing energy.

For the denominations, it requires encouragement and incentives to churches that decide to grow. Some of our wider church court structures are helpful and encouraging – others function as disincentives to growth. Another implication for

the denomination involves the training of clergy. Just as the medical community has recognized that, in the complexities of the modern world, general practitioners must have specialist training, so clergy involved in the leadership of change in congregations should have specialist training. I'm not talking about short courses, but a well organized and recognized post graduate course that can be undertaken in tandem with parish ministry.

Where does your church stand? What decisions are you making (intentionally or by default) about your future?

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