

“Small But Mighty”

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Rev. Suzanne Paul

This morning I want to share with you some information about what it means to be a member of a small congregation. What are the pros and cons of being part of what is termed “a family” church. In the early 1990’s, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar given by – at the time – the country’s leading authority on church growth and church dynamics. His name is Lyle Schaller and he has written dozens of books on everything about congregational life – from how to raise money to how to get more people in the pews on Sunday morning. This seminar was attended primarily by Protestant ministers and a few UU clergy. Because most churches function on the hierarchal model – getting the congregations to buy into what the bishop or the minister has to say – doesn’t create too much conflict. If the bishop decides that the church needs a new sanctuary to be more effective in spreading the Lord’s word – by golly, the members come up with the money and re-do the sanctuary. They are more prone to accept the wisdom of the authority figures in their church. My experience with Unitarian Universalist churches and clergy are quite different. So when the UU clergy attended the seminar conducted by the foremost authority on church life in America – instead of walking away with invaluable ideas on how to improve their own congregations – they wanted to debate every word that came out of his mouth. I left that seminar, excited and enthusiastic on what could be accomplished with some good old fashioned “teamwork.” What I discovered to be the stumbling block was that liberal congregations have a very hard time distinguishing what their goal and their mission really is. Also, complicating the issue, is the fact that most UU churches are considered in church parlance – to be small churches. Small congregations have a very different agenda and personality than large congregations. The only large UU congregation that I have had any personal experience with is the Ann Arbor UU church. With over 700 members, they function in a very different way than most UU congregations. Arriving back in Farmington armed with all this great knowledge, I thought the Farmington UU church would flourish in no time, if we just applied the principles and techniques outlined by Mr. Schaller. While Farmington did, indeed, grow during my eleven years there – we did not achieve the success that I had personally hoped for. It took me some time to realize what kept us from truly reaching our potential. I believe it to be the same reason that even after my departure – seven years later – they still struggle with the same issues. Congregations tend to all say the same thing – because they feel it is the right thing to say – “we want to grow.” In looking back at my ministry in Farmington and subsequently what happened in Brighton – it is very clear to me that unless everyone wants to grow – unless growth of the congregation is the top

priority of the church – substantial growth will not occur. My second epiphany around this issue is that I should have asked – “why do you want to grow?” If the answer is without equivocation – “because we want to spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism to more people” – then you have the right motivation for growing your church. But, unfortunately, 9 times out of 10 – what motivates congregations toward growth is money – an attempt to become more fiscally secure. Given their druthers, they would prefer to not change anything – just increase their revenue. Now if congregations were able to be really upfront and honest about this – it would save a lot of grief for their ministers and for the congregation, as well. There are other ways to raise income for religious communities without actively trying to recruit new members. I think that it is not that congregations mean to deceive one another or their minister – they probably think they are saying what is the right thing to say – they think wanting to increase the size of their congregation is the noble thing to do. But saying it is never enough. You have to believe it – you have to want it and then do what is needed to make it happen. So this morning – I want to put aside the issue of growing New Hope. New Hope is growing all by itself – and I think it will continue to do so. We have something special and unique here and people are visiting and liking what they see and hear – and our size will increase. And when it does, I believe we will embrace the changes with great enthusiasm. We will still be New Hope – only bigger. We will not equate bigger with better – because I don’t think we can get any better. We are just fine as we are - right now – right this very minute. New Hope is what is called a small or family church - and I want to share with you some of the characteristics of family churches and talk a bit about the advantages of being right where we are right now. As I have done many times over the years, I went to the writings of Lyle Schaller for his assessment of what small churches have to offer. In his book entitled “The Big Small Church Book” he describes the positive qualities around which a smaller congregation could develop a faithful and effective ministry. He cites thirty points – I will just share five this morning that I think are most significant. The first point I think is just wonderful – a smaller congregation fulfills the common expectations of its people. I really believe this – people come to smaller congregations expecting a greater level of intimacy and caring, expecting to be involved, expecting to have a say in what happens. Expecting such qualities, they participate in developing or perpetuating them. Since it is a smaller pond, they can have considerable influence in realizing their expectations. People who are not interested in those qualities will likely be more comfortable in a larger church. I think this first point really describes us to a T. Everyone here is really valued and important to the family – and I think we have been enjoying a level of intimacy that a large congregation simply could not afford us. Everyone at New Hope is important and needed. So this a great big PLUS of

being a small church. The second point is that in a small congregation, everyone knows almost everyone and acts and feels like family. There are so many people here this morning who do not live near their families. Of course, we have work associates and neighbors and friends – but they are not family. A small congregation can more effectively become an extended family. But we must always be sensitive to the new people coming into the family – most people enter a family through birth, adoption or marriage. It is suggested by Mr. Schaller that a congregation not grow by more than ten percent a year so that it can adopt and assimilate new members effectively. I am always so proud when guests to New Hope tell me that they felt so welcomed by the members when they visited. Have you ever noticed in your own family that the family members who are secure in their position within the family are always more welcoming to new family members or guests? I believe that our congregation feels very secure with each other and their position within the church and, therefore, has no problem extending hospitality to others. Another PLUS of being a small church. The third point is particularly noteworthy, and I believe has helped us do so much in such a short period of time. In small congregations organizational functioning is simple and immediate, rather than complex and delayed. Communication is faster and usually more effective. For those who were part of the original Organizational Committee – remember when we said – we are brand new and we get to make the rules. If a rule doesn't work – we just change the rule. Wow – what an innovative idea that was for a religious community. But it has worked so well. We are, because we are small, able to get information out to everyone in a timely manner. We are able to make decisions in a timely manner and because we know one another well – we have a higher level of trust. We trust that a fellow congregant will – if called upon to do so – will make a good decision on our behalf. We don't second guess each other or look for ulterior motives or hidden agendas. In a small church, pretty much what you see is what you get. And that is a great big PLUS of being a small congregation. The fourth point I really had never thought of before but I think it is very significant. Smaller churches find their identity in their character. The larger congregation knows who it is because of what it does, and it must keep on doing it in order to assure its existence. The small church has identity because of the experiences that it brings from the past...they find identity in their character, not in their activities. Our identity is in our character, not in our activities. I really love this point. People seek out larger churches for programs and a degree of anonymity. Others gravitate to smaller churches that are known not by their name or their programs but as friendly churches, or caring churches, or fun-loving churches. We at New Hope cannot begin to compete with the large congregations who offer a full menu of program options and an indoor basket ball court to boot. And we shouldn't even try. But we have something quite special that we can offer

– and that is our friendliness, our caring, and our sense of fun. We can offer helping hands and concern. New Hope can be proud of its character – we have taken the high road in times of trouble and been rewarded with the loyalty and love of good people. This is the biggest PLUS of being a small congregation. The fifth point and last point that I want to share is about the minister in a small church.

Studies show that in a small church, the congregation prefers its minister to be a pastor, friend, generalist and lover – not a professional, specialist, administrator or chief executive officer. Before I speak personally to this assessment I want to share

with you a bit more of what Lyle Schaller has to say about clergy in small churches. He writes: “A smaller church wants precisely what new pastors haven’t learned to be. Small congregations care far less about how much the pastor knows academically and far more about how well she or he will get to really know and care for them. Small churches want a lover, someone who cares effectively and personally. Based on the distance between the pulpit and pew, three styles of pastoral relationship may be identified; specialist, generalist and lover...the small church wants a lover. The pastor as lover is a source of stability, a kind of human Blarney Stone. He or she is the tangible symbol of love.” End quote. The tangible symbol of love. That is an awesome responsibility – and yet that is what I believe any minister of any size religious community must represent. Clergy – in my opinion – must love the congregation they serve or move on. The relationship between the congregation and the minister is always somewhat ill defined. Clergy may have contracts that address the expectations of the congregation – a job description if you will. They may agree to be in the office so many hours a week, do so many sermons per year, etc., but the role of the minister is not like being hired by the human resources department of General Motors. In – may I say – normal professions, one has a job description which outlines what will be expected of you as the employee – and there will be ways to measure whether you are doing your job well. There will be performance reviews and there are standards against which you will be evaluated. Calling a minister is so much trickier. Even the term – calling – versus hiring sets clergy apart from other professions. So what is the ultimate expectation that religious communities have for their called minister?

Well, they will tell you lots of things. Especially in Unitarian Universalist churches. Most often they will say we want an “intellectual” – someone who will deliver brilliant sermons. The second most important item on their list is often – we want someone who will grow the church – bring in new members. I believe congregations make the biggest mistake in their choice of a minister when they don’t look at their candidates and ask “which one will love us the most.” Which one will be with us during our good times and our bad. Which one will comfort us when our loved one dies or we are dying. Which one will change their day off when a congregant has an emergency. Which one says call or email me any time

and means it. The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Phifer is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School – and a brilliant man. And he grew the church to over 700 members and built a magnificent new building. But that is not why he had a successful ministry in Ann Arbor for more than 25 years. He was successful because he loved his congregation and they knew it. He was the tangible symbol of love. I hope that I am the tangible symbol of love for New Hope. That is my highest calling. I can do that best in a small church – so for me, that is a big PLUS of a smaller congregation. In conclusion, I want to share this line from Lyle Schaller – “the work of faithful smaller churches is not business, budgets and buildings – it’s loving and caring for each other.” Now that’s the biggest PLUS of being small but mighty. So be it.

Sources used in the preparation of this paper:
“the big small church book”