

Small Blessings

Blessings and benefits to smaller-size ministry

There are benefits and blessings for members and leaders of small youth groups and small churches.

Pressure to be something you're not

There is a natural desire to attract young people to our ministries. And let's not forget about pressure from sessions, boards, committees and families. Being a small church means we can't do everything and be everything. But why would we want to be? First, that's not who we are called to be. We each have different gifts and talents to use for ministry. Second, we need to accept that we serve small churches and celebrate that gift. Let go of the pressure to be big and accept the responsibility to accompany young people, whether that's one or 101, in their faith journey.

Finding out what you do well (focus)

This goes hand in hand with reducing the pressure to be something you're not. When you find out what you do well, you can put your focus there, use your energy to find your purpose and gifts, and operate within them. Small-church youth ministry isn't a stepping stone to a larger church. Your experience may open opportunities for larger church youth ministry one day. But focusing on what you do well and what your ministry is called to do and be, and placing your focus there can be a building block in your growth as a minister to young people.

Brings you closer (community)

Being small can mean cultivating a close community. When everyone knows one another's names, families, interests, favorite foods, etc., there is a palpable tie. Many books have been written on building community in youth groups. Some tips include notice newcomers, create small groups for discussion and prayer, and call people by name. Though these are not the only things needed to build closer community in a youth ministry, learning names and noticing newcomers are easier in a small youth ministry. From here, a group can focus on getting to know one another beneath the exterior shells we let most of the world see. We can work on sharing the discussion and discovering individual members' gifts and how they can share those with the whole group.

You are your own small group!

I've heard it said, "Going small is big!" Larger ministries desire small groups. That's why they create them. Early in my ministry, I once lamented that the ministry I served didn't have enough kids to have small-group ministries. What I couldn't see was that we were a small group!

Intergenerational ministry

Small-group youth ministry opens up more opportunity for intergenerational ministry. A youth ministry in a silo is a bad decision. It cuts off people and age groups from one another, hindering the community of faith, hindering the learning and sharing of faith stories. It fosters the idea of an old-versus-young mentality. Young people need to be able to serve with people who are older than they are so they can be accompanied by mature Christians. And young people make outstanding shepherds for children and younger youth.

Youth benefit by affirming the value of the whole community of faith, by offering support for one another's concerns, by giving new meaning to the family of faith. Intergenerational ministry fosters a climate for mentoring and reverse mentoring with children, youth, and adults of all ages engaged in discipleship together. People can serve the world alongside each other. They can accompany each other on their spiritual journeys. It counters the cultural norm of separating people into ages and stages.

Keeping the connection after graduation

Another benefit of young people setting down roots in a multiage, inclusive church service is that young people are more likely to stay in church past their teenage years. So many transitions take place in the lives of young people, beginning school and changing from primary to high school. The biggest could be said to be from finishing high school and transitioning to a university or employment.

If a young person has only ever been involved in age-specific ministries and not included in serving in a multiage church, then it's usually at this point that so many young people stop going to church. If a young person has always been involved and serving in a multiage church, when they reach the end of high school they have the benefit of a community that hasn't shifted with each passing age group. They have a place where they can find stability amid all the transitions around them.

Reverse mentoring

Older people need younger people to serve with, not just so they can be reminded of the vigor and enthusiastic potential of youth, but also because young people have a lot to teach. They see the world from different perspectives. They can open up new understanding of a faith community and the love of Christ to older generations. I had a group of teen boys that loved hanging out with one of our older, retired ministers. They liked hearing his stories of growing up, early days in ministry, camping, etc. But they loved it when he asked about their lives and their opinions! They taught each other a valuable lesson: Each one of us can minister to another. Added to this is the display of God's wisdom and glory to the world when such a diverse group of people come together because of their unity in Christ and not because of their unity in age or gender or race.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a gift, but it's also easier to greet everyone and share this gift when they are few in number. One of the biggest barriers to hospitality is not noticing visitors. Though this can be an issue with even small churches, it's a benefit with smaller numbers. We must be careful, however, not to form cliques and only have fellowship among ourselves.

Relational

There has been much written about relational ministry. Small in number can be beneficial in connecting with your young people. Supporting them by attending a sporting event or an arts performance or show is doable without having young people feel excluded or that some are selected as favorites. With a small group, each student could be visited at least once a year, without burning yourself out.

Working with churches in your community and presbytery

Having a small youth ministry affords you the opportunity to partner in ministry with other churches in the community or presbytery. Planning a joint event, worship service, camp, or mission opportunity can help expand your family of faith and connect with other young people. It also can help young people see the larger body of Christ. A favorite quote overheard at a presbytery event was, "They are Presbyterian, too? Just like us?"

Some of the wonderful attributes a small youth ministry has to offer!

The attributes most leaders agree are needed for a successful youth ministry have nothing to do with numbers, big facilities, or money. They have everything to do with being authentic, caring, and an example of Christ's love in the world. A church needs to have the following to cultivate a thriving youth ministry:

Prayer: Prayer is important. We need to pray with and for our young people on a regular basis.

Practical theology: In his book *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Richard R. Osmer explains the term by asking the following questions while studying Scripture:

1. What is going on?
2. Why is this going on?
3. What ought to be going on?
4. How might we respond?

Scripture: Our faith is based on God's story of love found in the Bible. Let's explore the Scriptures and discover how to apply them practically to our lives.

Originality: Don't copy what the church down the road is doing. Use your own unique gifts and talents. You have a freedom in smallness to think outside the box.

Adults and parents who are involved: Young people need to know that their parents and other adults love and care about them!

Opportunities for the whole church, not just a segmented portion:
See intergenerational ministry.

Closing

As a youth minister in a once very small church, smallness ceased to be a negative when we explored the many benefits of a small church/youth ministry.

A young high school student once told me, “I went to [mega church/youth ministry down the road]. My family left two years ago. I just got a call from the youth minister asking where I had been the last two weeks. I told him I hadn’t been there in two years. He didn’t even notice. I love that everyone knows my name here. It feels like a family.”

Large churches are wonderful and have their offerings, but small churches are wonderful, too. Don’t miss the blessings of small-church youth ministry and the lasting impact it can have in the lives of your young people and the entire congregation to be a part of transforming lives through your family of faith.

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