

The following article is used with permission from The John Maxwell Company,  
[www.johnmaxwell.com](http://www.johnmaxwell.com)

## 3 Dangers Small Churches Face

by *Dan Reiland*

In the last Pastor's Coach article I wrote about three dangers that large churches face.

1. The ultimate Catch-22, living up to your own status.
2. Failing to successfully navigate the tension between Spirit and System.
3. Staff becoming event planners with theological degrees.

Smaller churches are a different deal altogether. I served in a small church in Southern California – Lakeside Wesleyan. It was a great experience. It was at Lakeside that I delivered my first sermon. Now there's a scary memory. No one left their faith, (I'm pretty sure), and eventually they did let me "preach" again. I was the Student Pastor and loved every second of it. I love the passion and stretch of a smaller church like Lakeside. They have heart.

I was a full time Private Investigator back then and on staff part time. There was no money. Pastor Richard Lauby went to the Church Board and tried to get a modest stipend but there just wasn't any room in the budget. So the board, starting with Pastor Rich, dug in their own pockets and gave what totaled to be \$100 a month for a year. That was a long time ago, and so cool. I will never forget it. Small churches do whatever it takes not just because they have to, but because they want to. They didn't need to do that. I would have done it for free. But they wanted to stretch and start making progress toward their first pastoral staff member after the Pastor and his Administrative Assistant.

I love the relationships and shepherding that happen in a healthy small church. But like all good things, if not given direction, the strengths can turn into potential dangers. The following three things are very common dangers that small churches face.

### • **Believing that if the church is small it doesn't make a big difference.**

Too many small churches have an unnecessary inferiority complex. I wish I could travel and give a talk in each one to remind them how important they are to the Kingdom. First, many people don't prefer large or mega churches. One of the most common personal responses to a large or mega-church is that it's "just too big." I hear that often. That is accompanied by "The parking lot is crazy, I don't know the Pastor and the music is too loud." The music may still be a little loud in a small church but the fact is that a small church is infinitely easier to attend. They have a family feel that people like.

Second, life change is the mission, not size. We all want our church to grow, but just because it's bigger doesn't mean it's healthier or that it's making a Kingdom difference. Life change is what matters. Are people getting saved? Are marriages being healed? Is compassion being demonstrated in your community? Are young adults being called to ministry? That's the kind of stuff that matters. It's not an either or proposition, evangelism and discipleship go hand in hand. But large-in-size without life change is not healthy, any more than big government without the commensurately increasing measureable good of the people is effective.

Third, all large churches began as small churches. Your church may never become really big. That's up to God. But it should be growing, at least a little, all the time. For example, if your church has an average of 60 people this year and 65 next year – good. Keep leading. Growing from 60 to 65 with 10 salvations (example only) is far better than 100 to 150 with no salvations! What you believe about your church matters. If you believe it makes a difference, that goes a long

way toward what actually happens.

- **Chasing feeling good over doing right.**

This is perhaps the most common example of a small church strength that can turn into a weakness. The family vibe feels good. Like the saying from the old sitcom, Cheers – “A place where everyone knows your name.” (I know that really dates me.) It’s great for fellowship but not so good for the real purpose of church, reaching those who are far from God.

I love the local church, and I’m honest about its realities. Many small churches will say they want to grow, but they really don’t. When I visit, they are “surface” friendly but don’t make it easy for a new person to fit in. A number of churches have resisted going to two services. They are 70% - 80% full in one service and would unquestionably grow by adding a 2nd service. However, they push back saying “But we won’t know everyone anymore.” The problem with that thinking is that the purpose of church is not to know everyone. It’s to reach people for Jesus and help them grow in their faith. Several churches that called me for some coaching had previously made feel good decisions rather than do right decisions. One had refurbished a fellowship hall rather than expand the sanctuary. Another had the landscaping redone rather than invest in a second staff member. Keep in mind, these were all good people who love God. But, it is sometimes very difficult to do the right thing when doing the church feel good thing is easier.

It is a traditional custom for the pastor in a small church to stand in a “receiving” line to greet the people as they leave the church. This is not bad, but it’s not a good leadership use of time. It feels good, but doesn’t grow the church. If you are the Pastor, let me share with you that it is wiser to strategically make yourself available to guests and pour time into them. This doesn’t mean you ignore your faithful congregation, but the new people must come first. There are other things that are “feel good rather than do right.” One more example is backing off of the truth in God’s Word on a topic like tithing for fear of offending people. It feels good to avoid sensitive topics, but the right thing is to teach, with love and compassion, the whole truth in God’s Word.

- **Trading dreams for duty.**

I’ve never met a pastor yet who didn’t have a vision and dream for changed lives because of Jesus and growth for the church when he or she first arrived. The first several sermon series, even the first two to three years of sermon series are filled with hope, passion and a dream of a better future. But then, often, something happens. The dream begins to fade. The vision grows dim, and what was once a passion-filled service turns to faithful duty. Being faithful is worthy. But if you are a pastor, I want to remind you of your dream and vision when you came to the church. There is more. It’s not easy, but there is more for you at your church.

Don’t allow yourself to be taken hostage to the unattainable “duty” of meeting the expectations of every person in your congregation. Take your dream back. You don’t have to do every visit and make every meeting. Someone else can make a few hospital calls. Too many pastors say to me “I can’t give time to new Christians, evangelism, leadership development and prayer because I have too much to do. Those are the things you need to do. Talk with your board, get their blessing and trade some of the duty away and go back to your dream! You may be surprised at how much support you will find in that pursuit. God is for you and your church.

So, watch out for these three big dangers in small churches and keep on leading!