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Study guide

Small congregations share strengths, struggles

By Robert C. Blezard

Many of our congregations are struggling with the same three interrelated difficulties: a smaller pool of members, a shrinking financial base, and fixed costs from an older building that may be too big for today's ministry yet requires expensive maintenance. How is your congregation doing?

Exercise 1: The “big box” effect

In the last 50 years our nation's economic life has transitioned from local, family owned stores to bigger and bigger chain retail outlets with lots of light, space, parking and other conveniences. What evidence have you seen of this trend in your community? How has it changed things?

- What do local “mom and pop” stores have that the big box stores don't? What can they offer that distinguishes them? How have successful local merchants shifted gears in order to continue serving people?
- Have you witnessed this in your community's religious life—where Christians tend to worship in bigger churches that offer modern spaces with lots of conveniences? Explain. What can we as church leaders learn from successful “mom and pop” stores? What does your congregation offer that big churches cannot?

Exercise 2: Mission-oriented

“Why, in God's name, does your congregation exist?” Seriously. What is the underlying vision that animates and coordinates everything the congregation does? What ultimate purposes is it fulfilling? In other words, what's the “why” of your congregation?

- How are the underlying vision and ultimate purposes related to God's vision and purposes for humanity? In other words, what is the “in God's name” of your congregation?
- In identifying God's vision and purpose, many Christians look to Jesus' “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:19-20). Reading that passage, what do you learn? How well does your congregation fulfill the Great Commission? Looking at the Great Commission, what would be a good vision and purpose for your congregation? (For your life?) How would you go about living into it?
- **For action:** come up with a “Great Commission” statement of vision



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and purpose for your congregation and present it to your pastor or congregation council for action.

Exercise 3: People shortage

What is the overall trend in membership and worship attendance at your congregation? Looking through church records, chart the actual numbers for today, 2010, 2000, 1990, 1980, etc., as far back as you can go. Is your congregation losing members, holding steady or increasing? To what would you attribute the trend?

- Is your congregation worried about a decline in membership and attendance? How and why? On a scale of 1 to 10, how great is the worry? What is the congregation doing about it?
- Discuss the pros and cons of each of these reactions to worry about congregational attendance: hand-wringing, navel-gazing, brainstorming, risk-taking, prayer, innovation in worship, devotion to Scripture, outreach, visioning, listening to God and inviting.
- When you read the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19-20 (see previous exercise), which reactions are called for?
- **For action:** come up with a Great Commission-based strategy for new membership and give it to church leaders for consideration.

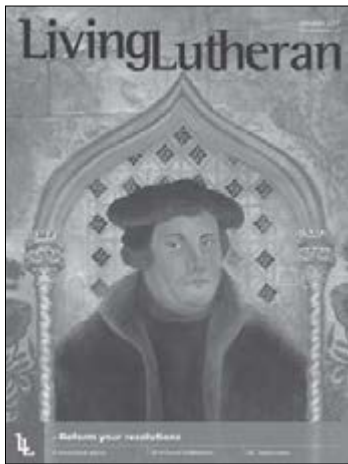
Exercise 4: What you offer

Why do you want people to join your congregation? As your congregation endeavors to expand its membership base, how does it view new people who would come into your community? Explore these two ways of viewing new people:

What they would bring to us. We want new people to help us continue the ministry at our church that we love so much. New people, especially young families with children, would energize our church life, revive our Sunday schools and fill the pews every Sunday morning. Their donations would help us balance our budget. They would also provide “new blood” for our leadership team that for years has consisted of the same people doing way too much.

What our church can give others. We want new people to come to our church to experience the love of a truly caring Christian community. In addition to our fellowship, we offer excellent worship that is designed to bring people into the presence of the holy through thoughtful prayers, superior music and dynamic preaching. Like everything else we do, our Christian education is designed not merely to inform people but to form them in the faith. In sum, we want people to grow in Christ with us.

- What are the pros and cons of each view? When your congregation



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talks about gaining new members, which view is most prominent? Is this good or bad?

- What are the disadvantages and limitations of focusing primarily on the first—what new people can bring to us? Focusing primarily on the second? What would be an appropriate balance between the two?

Exercise 5: Outreach and evangelism

When it comes to attracting new members to church, most congregations fall into one of two categories: welcoming or inviting.

Welcoming: We are a friendly church. People who come to worship are greeted with joy and warmth. Our church building is attractive and easy to navigate, so as to put people at ease, and there is lots of parking. Our restrooms are spacious and clean. The service bulletin is put together with newcomers in mind, so worship is easy to follow. We want every visitor who comes in the door to feel valued and welcomed.

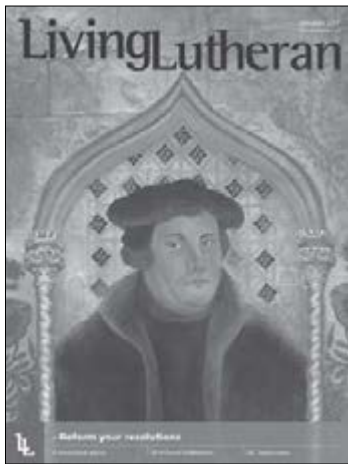
Inviting: We understand that a lot of people out there need Christ in their lives and would benefit greatly from a relationship with our church, but they may never have the occasion to seek us out and come to worship. So we are doing the best we can to invite them to church through our outside signs, our website, our Facebook page and other social media tools. Moreover, we organize or participate in community gatherings where we have a visible presence and people can get to know us. A few of us even regularly walk the community to get to know our neighbors.

- Which approach better fits your congregation today? Explain. How's that working out?
- What are the positive aspects of both approaches? What are the limitations of both? On the whole, which approach would be more likely to bring new people to your congregation? Would either approach on its own be ideal? What "balance" between inviting and welcoming would work best?
- Given your congregation's history, culture and context, what do think needs to be done? What would be the best way to achieve it?
- **For action:** Brainstorm a strategy for your congregation to achieve an ideal balance of welcoming and inviting.

Exercise 6: Budget issues

Is your congregation financially sound? Does current income pay for current ministry? Did you end the last year "in the black"? If not, what was last year's deficit? How many years has it been since you had a balanced budget?

- As churches face tough times, they often "tighten the belt" by cutting



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back. In the last few years, what steps has your congregation taken to help the financial picture? What ministry areas were affected by these cuts? How did it impact congregational life?

- Some congregations experience a “vicious circle” when it comes to budget and ministry. To ease budget problems they cut ministry, which reduces outreach and services that help make the congregation a vital and inviting place for newcomers, which further results in budget problems. Has this been your congregation’s experience?
- When all other budget-saving measures have been exhausted, many congregations resort to having a part-time pastor. Has this happened or is it under consideration at your congregation? Have other congregations in your community experienced this? If a full-time pastor was unable to help the church grow in membership and finances, is it realistic to think that a part-time pastor would? What does a part-time ministry bode for the long-term prospects of a congregation?

Exercise 7: Stewardship and giving

What has your congregation’s trend in giving been in the last 10 years?

- **If your congregation is doing OK:** Meeting budget is wonderful, but the ideal financial condition would be for the congregation to run a surplus. Dream and brainstorm: What new mission or ministries could your congregation begin if it had more money?

Is there a stewardship strategy in place that keeps the finances sound? Could starting a stewardship program, or strengthening the existing one, help generate funds for growth and new mission?

- **If your congregation is suffering financially:** How much “in the red” is your congregation? Where is it making up the shortfall? How long can the congregation continue? Would a stewardship program, or strengthening the existing program, help?

Exercise 8: Building blues

Many of our congregations are saddled with aging buildings that not only require a lot of time and money, but also are no longer suitable for ministry needs. How is yours?

- Walk through your church building. Are all the areas being used? Have they been well-maintained, or are there a lot of areas that need repair or renovation? Are major structural needs going unmet? How much would it cost to fix or renovate your building to put it up to snuff?
- Looking at Sunday worship attendance, what percentage of the total sanctuary seating capacity is used?

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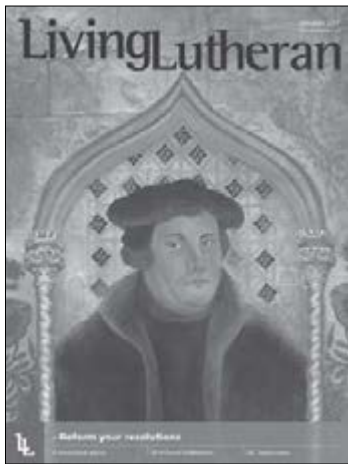
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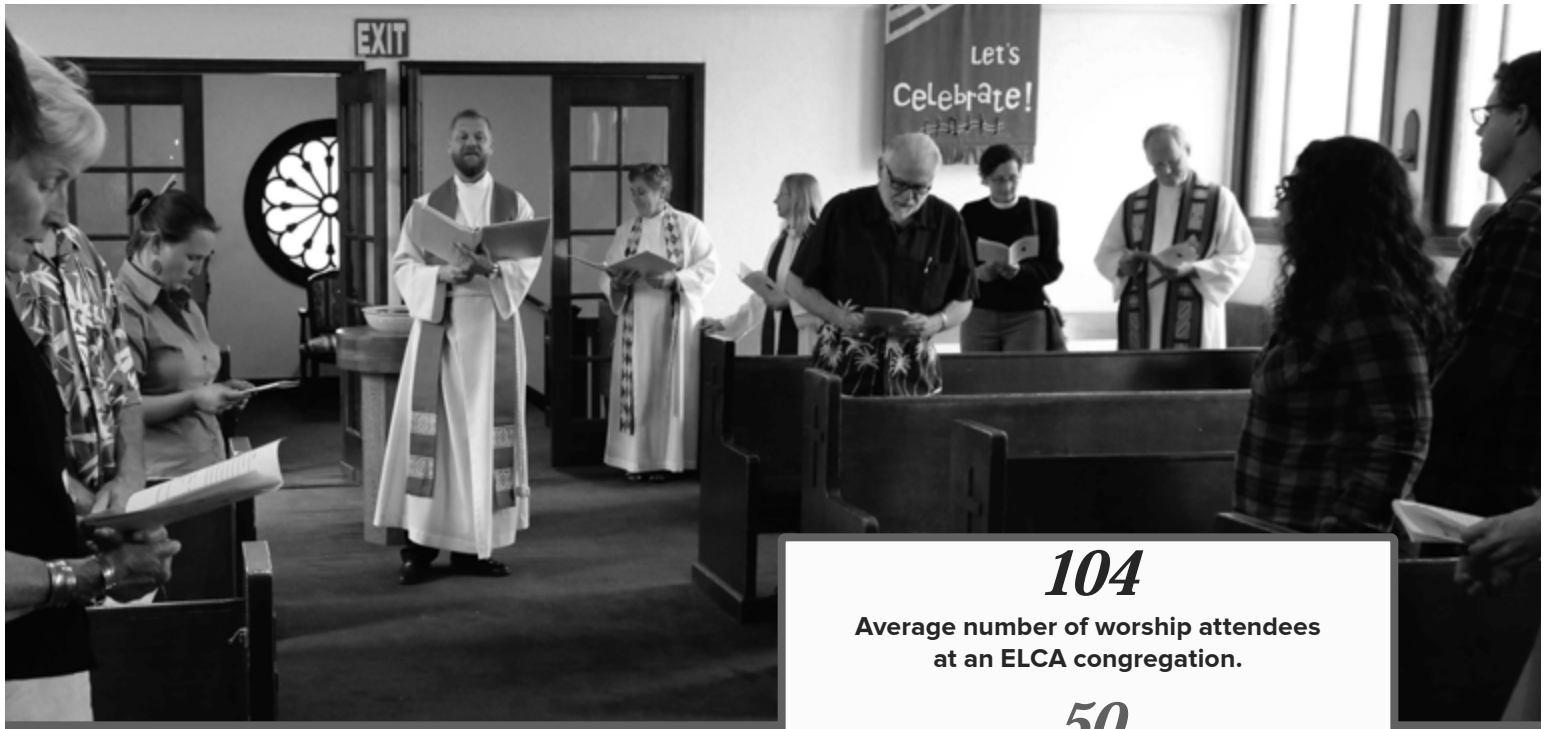
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- How well does your building meet your current ministry needs? If your leaders could simply wave a magic wand and reconfigure your building for today's needs, what changes would they make and why?
- Looking at your congregation's latest budget, how much money goes for building upkeep? What percentage of the budget does that entail?
- What are the pros and cons of your building? Is it more of a liability than an asset? Explain.
- If your congregation council sold the church building, would you still have a community? If so, what would you do to continue? If not, what does that say about your congregation?



For Lutheran Church of the Cross in Berkeley, Calif., to grow, Cary Bass-Deschenes, its pastor, would like to see more lay-led initiatives and more lay involvement in worship.

Small congregations share strengths, struggles

By Karris Golden

When Thomas Batterman retired from full-time parish ministry, he began serving as a supply pastor in the Dayton, Ohio, area. The call often takes him to serve small congregations in crisis. It has been an eye-opener for him: “Out here, the future of the local congregation looks bleak.”

By “out here,” Batterman is referring in part to the isolation such ELCA members sometimes feel. “They don’t feel connected to the national church because the national church isn’t talking about the problems they face,” he said. “Diversity is worthwhile ... but to some of these small congregations, diversity is someone under 50—or a family with children walking in.”

These small congregations grapple with aging and dwindling membership, decreased giving, maintaining expensive infrastructure and a leadership vacuum. Of particular concern is staffing—some can’t afford a full-time pastor and can’t find a part-time one. Stressed budgets mean some church buildings are only open for weekly worship services.

According to ELCA Research and Evaluation, there are correlations between declining worship

104
Average number of worship attendees at an ELCA congregation.

50
Highest number of worship attendees at a “small” congregation.

37.6
Percentage of ELCA congregations with 50 or fewer worship attendees.

31
Average number of worship attendees per small congregation.

Source: ELCA Research and Evaluation

attendance, giving shortfalls and staffing costs in small congregations. While the number of ELCA congregations declined between 2010 and 2015 from 10,008 to 9,326, the number of congregations that can’t fund a full-time pastor remained above 2,000—which is projected to grow.

Nearly a third of ELCA congregations don’t have and/or can’t afford a full-time pastor. They employ temporary solutions, such as fill-ins from other churches and retired pastors like Batterman.

The problem with buildings

These issues exist in both rural and urban settings, said Cary Bass-Deschenes, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Berkeley, Calif.

An average of 38 people attend weekly worship services at Cross. “Most of the members here weren’t raised Lutheran,” he said. “We’re not very affluent. Some of our members are homeless, and some have been homeless.”

Cross earns rental income by sharing space with a Finnish congregation, a teen shelter and more than two dozen 12-step program meetings.

But Bass-Deschenes believes low attendance, building maintenance and other budget strains could eventually take their toll. Without changes, his full-time position won't likely be sustainable.

"For the church to continue on and grow ... I'd like to have more lay-led initiatives and more lay involvement with worship," he said.

Similar challenges exist at Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham, N.C., which averages 39 people at worship services. In recent years the congregation experienced a sharp decline in giving and worship attendance. More than half the members left.

Remaining members pursued new life as a "renewing congregation" with a grant from the churchwide organization as part of the ELCA's strategy to revitalize flagging congregations (see page 22).

Timothy Taylor became full-time pastor of the struggling congregation in May. "We're standing up again and learning how to be the church," he said. "Our purpose is to specifically regrow the church where it is planted."

The struggles of a small congregation aren't easy, Taylor added. Members want to draw new people, support youth programs, develop outreach initiatives and more. They often seek to retain some of the congregation's history and heritage. "We fall in love with our buildings," he said. "I'll ask, 'If the building burns down, will the church cease to exist?' If the answer is 'yes,' it's time to think differently."

Taylor is working with members to create a strategic growth plan. What he tells Abiding Savior's members applies to anyone, he said.

He often asks, "Why in God's name are you here in this place?" Look elsewhere for a "social club," he adds, because the church is a place to do God's work in the community.

Committed to mission

Despite its size, St. Paul Lutheran, a small congregation in Cedar Falls, Iowa, balances its budget and gives generously to a variety of local, national and international causes. The congregation sees it this way: they own a mission of service and outreach, said member Sofie Michalicek.

Many members are in their 90s and weekly worship attendance hovers at 40—fewer when snowbirds go to Texas and Florida for the winter. For more than a decade, St. Paul has been served by a part-time pastor and Sunday organist.


"I believe what has helped us over the years is that we live within our means, on a modest budget," Michalicek said. Members pitch in to cover cleaning and maintenance.

Still, while ministry and mission bear fruit, Michalicek worries that St. Paul may be "surviving," not "growing." Membership has alternated between a plateau and slight decline over the past decade.

Growth is possible and should be easy. With a median age of 34, Cedar Falls is a university town and part of an urban area.

"Our membership continues to age, and we don't have many new members coming to fill the pews," Michalicek said. "I'm afraid we'll continue in that way."

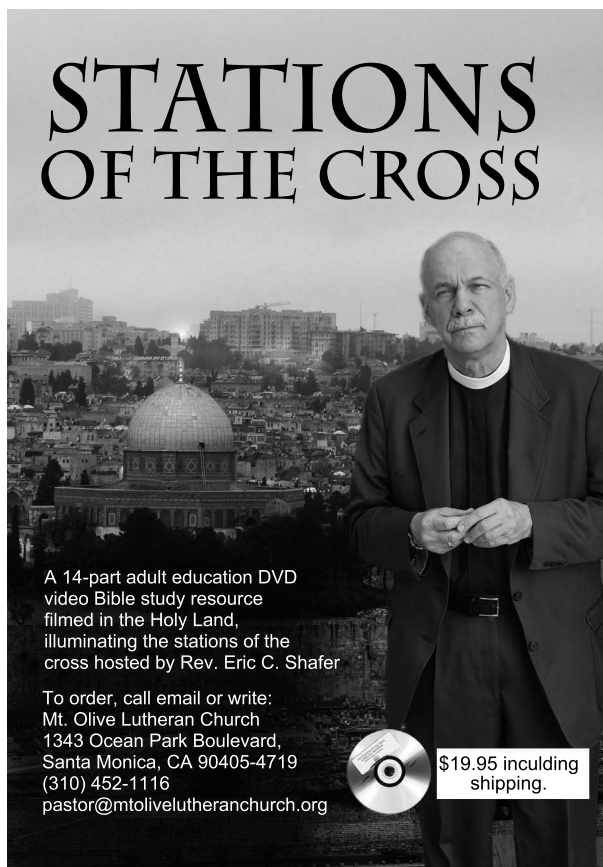
At age 33, she is a noticeable exception. The lifelong member even served two terms as council president during her early 20s. St. Paul is a home to her, and she believes fellow members feel the same.

"Our church building is important to us. It's nothing extra fancy," she said. "It would be hard to imagine getting ready for church and not going there. But if we lost our building, for whatever reason, there would be sadness, and we'd find a way to go on together somewhere else." 

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Karris Golden is a writer and member of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa.



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