

**The Strategically Small Church:
Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective.**

Brandon J. O'Brien,
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Brandon O'Brien challenges the prevailing image of a successful Christian local church. He argues that the megachurch model has so controlled our view of a healthy growing church, that we have neglected other ways of measuring success that are much more appropriate for the vast majority of Christian churches in the United States today. O'Brien turns conventional wisdom on its head by claiming that small churches (300 or fewer members) actually have advantages over larger churches in growing the kingdom of God. Small churches must recognize these advantages and form their ministry around them, rather than seeking in vain to become the next megachurch.

For most churches, the megachurch grail is a mirage that can never be grasped. This creates disillusionment and discouragement for both pastors and members. O'Brien seeks to free them from this despair, and lays out a number of advantages that small churches have over larger ones in doing effective ministry.

In Chapter 1, O'Brien argues for a redefinition of successful ministry in the local church. He says that the problem is that the 6 percent of churches in the United States

that are megachurches have become the standard for all churches. This has created a “narrative of obscurity” (25) that controls the thinking of small church leaders. This bigger is better mindset has also created a thirst for celebrity among many pastors and churches. O’Brien calls for a redefinition of the standard for the other 94 percent of churches. He appeals to the New Testament Church to show that God does not require ever larger and larger congregations. Rather, the multiplication of smaller groups is how the Bible describes growth in the early Church. The modern paradigm for church growth must change. “Until we stop measuring our success in terms of numerical size and growth, we may be unable to accurately analyze the faithfulness of our ministry” (31, 32). Smallness should not be seen as a liability, but as an advantage. In fact, several times throughout the book, O’Brien asserts that some large churches are actually seeking to emulate some of the advantages of small churches by retooling their ministries to embrace dynamics that small congregations possess naturally.

In chapter 2, O’Brien shares the story of four ministries and their leaders who have moved away from the megachurch model for evaluating success. For reasons related to leadership development, discipleship, and spiritual formation, these ministries have intentionally developed an approach that will “leverage the strengths of strategically small ministry” (40). The author sees a trend among many megachurches towards multiple sites and small group ministry. This is an attempt to capture the intimacy and connectedness that small churches provide. The growing home church movement also reflects this change in how church is being done.

The third chapter contrasts excellence in church programming and authenticity. Authenticity is highly valued by many in Western culture today, and O'Brien believes that the striving for excellence in worship can work against a sense of authenticity and "being real". The hunger for authenticity will cause seekers to "excuse unprofessional church music and preaching if they sense the congregation is worshipping from the heart" (67). Small churches are authentic, where as megachurches are striving to be authentic by attempting to capture intimacy and authenticity through multiple sites and small groups, which mimic the realities already present in the smaller congregations. O'Brien warns small churches not to attempt to be relevant, and not to try to operate like a large church. Both will destroy the innate authenticity they possess.

Chapter 4 addresses what the author calls nimbleness. The megachurch model of church includes a long list of various programs, all of which require quite a bit of money and human resources. O'Brien encourages small churches to be lean and nimble. He believes small congregations should choose a few ministries and do them very well, focusing their limited resources to increase depth and effectiveness. He suggests that churches not "run a program unless [they] are particularly gifted and equipped to run it or unless no one else is doing it" (81). Programs should address a genuine need that is not being met, they should be theologically justified, and the church should have the gifts and passion for those ministries. And if a church does not have to get credit for its good work, it can support ministries that are already in operation, led by other churches or organizations. Cooperation rather than competition allows churches to avoid duplicate services, and connects the members with others in

the community, which can be a very effective evangelistic strategy. And non-professional programming allows all members to be involved in service.

This leads to chapter 5, where O'Brien focuses on the small church as a church that equips all its members for ministry, using the spiritual gifts of each congregant. With diminishing discretionary time for most people, the focus should move away from getting members to come to the church for five hours a week to do ministry. Instead, church leaders should teach them to minister where they already spend fifty or sixty hours a week-in the marketplace. This type of outreach is less demanding of financial and human resources, and makes evangelism a natural part of members' daily life. Each member can design a unique ministry in the daily life that fits the passion and spiritual gifts that God has equipped them with. This ministry approach involves less management and control by the pastor and other church leaders, thus reducing the stress on their lives and families. This "letting go may be the pastor's biggest challenge" (108), but it allows for organic ministry both inside and outside the church, and does not require professional level ability and skills. This approach to ministry permits full participation by the members, and puts the mission of the church front and center.

The intergenerational approach to church is the subject of the sixth chapter. Young adults today, says O'Brien, are hungry for family. Many of them are from broken homes, and often they have never observed a healthy family in any facet of their life experience. So rather than segregating church members by age, the small church enables all generations to work and worship together. Thus, the church becomes the

family that many young adults are seeking. O'Brien sees this as the best way to attract and retain young adults in the church. They are eager to be mentored and to mentor others. The small church approach to church, where resources require the generations to participate together, is the ideal venue for these mentoring relationships to develop. Teens and young adults need to be ministered to, but a vital key to retaining them is equipping and using them to serve in and outside the church. O'Brien says the older members of the congregation must take the initiative. "The onus for the success of intergenerational ministry rests on the older members of the congregations. They must embrace their potential as mentors, as functional parents and grandparents" (136).

Chapter 7 describes how megachurches actually retard the development of new leaders from within the congregation, because only a few gifted persons can provide the professional quality of ministry that the focus on excellence in these congregations demands. Even as megachurches are developing multiple campuses, the sermon is often beamed to the remote sites, so that they all are experiencing the sermons of the gifted leader. For O'Brien, this thwarts the possibility of developing new preachers from within the congregation. The small church, on the other hand, will tolerate the subpar sermons of elders and others who are learning to preach. The small church often recognizes its role as a training field for new ministers that God is calling to serve, whom the congregation will eventually send out to minister in other places. "A church focused on aggregating large numbers of people with attention-grabbing messages can't afford to put an amateur in the pulpit" (144). Yet, when the star preacher retires or moves on, the large church often finds it difficult to replace him or her. But kingdom

growth requires the constant development of new preachers and church leaders. The small church is the place for this to happen.

The final chapter summarizes the main points of the book. The strengths of the small churches are that they are authentic and nimble. They are well situated to empower lay members for ministry, foster and nurture intergenerational mentoring, and to develop and deploy new leaders. Perhaps the book is best summed up in this statement: “The church’s God-given job description is to make disciples, not to attract consumers” (166). Thus, the definition of success for the church is shifted from large crowds and buildings, from professional staff and a plethora of top quality programs, to the reproduction of Christians whose lives are focused on ministry and service to others.

Brandon O’Brien writes from his ministry experience, having previously served as the pastor of two small churches. He currently serves as the editor-at-large for *Leadership Journal* and is a doctoral student in historical theology.

O’Brien’s greatest contribution in this book may be that he redefines success for the vast majority of Christian churches that will never become megachurches. Small churches in particular can get an inferiority complex, but this is not necessary. His focus on developing members as ministers (in the broadest sense) and leaders is healthy and biblical, and certainly in line with Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 4:11, 12. His warnings to pastors about the desire for celebrity and notoriety are certainly appropriate. The author does a good job of identifying the strengths of small churches and the weaknesses of megachurches. Some may argue that he does not sufficiently

address the weaknesses of small churches. For example, sometimes small churches are in very unattractive locations that seem to deter growth. The size and quality of the building also may affect the interest of some in the church.

O'Brien seems to indicate that all small churches are authentic. This may not be the case, as hypocrisy, pretension, and pride can plague churches of any size. And although small churches would seem to be always capable of being nimble, at times the power brokers in a small church are so strong that the pastor is often unable to move it into new directions. On the other hand, the megachurch is often led by a staff that is empowered to make changes quickly. O'Brien is certainly correct in the potential that he sees in the small church, and his analysis is probably true in many cases, but there are situations where some of the dynamics he identifies may be reversed.

The book would be strengthened if the author were to cite empirical research about the kingdom growth of megachurches versus small churches. It would be interesting to see which type of church is reaching the non-churched, versus gathering believers from other congregations.

I would strongly recommend *The Strategically Small Church*, particularly for pastors and members of small churches. O'Brien takes the pressure off of small churches as they attempt to become what they will probably never be. He also shares excellent ideas on how small churches can focus on mission, develop church leaders, and develop people rather than institutions. Administrative leaders in denominations should also use this material to cast a positive vision for small churches that is attainable and practical. O'Brien has definitely contributed to the praxis of ministry by

the Christian Church, and his book will encourage the vast majority of churches to focus on doing ministry in their own armor, rather than lamenting what they are not, and will probably never be.