



Be The Small Church

by Rev. Rob MacDougall



The UCC "Be The Church" identity material is deeply engaging for many of us. It is one of those unabashed proclamations about who we are as God's people in the UCC. It has a mindfulness quality to it, not stressing the past nor hoping for the future, but living/serving/being in the now.

Each church, each pastor, each congregation member can affirm the many listed elements of what it means to be the church--ah, but living them out in each particular life and context, that's where the church begins looking more and more like a patchwork quilt. Each church, pastor, member discovers and embraces what being the church means to them and there is no place where this is more true than in small churches. Small, faithful churches are ones that let go of trying to be things they are not and embrace who they are. While each church has its particular life, if I were to make a bumper sticker that began with "**Be The Small Church**" the list of proclamations might include the following:

- Celebrate Relationships
- Care For Each Other
- Strengthen Lay Leaders
- Engage Your Community
- Affirm Creativity
- Be Multifaceted
- Value What and Who Is Present
- Worship Regularly
- Do Something, Not Everything
- Practice Forgiveness

Like all things in the church the list could go on and on, but the qualities listed above are particularly important in small churches, and small church pastors need to be particularly gifted in walking the small church pilgrimage with their congregation.

Pastors in small churches are not CEOs, they are not lecturers, they are not number counters or persons with visions of grandeur--small church pastors are listeners, lovers, companions, teachers, prayers, healers, challengers.

Lewis Parks, founder of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C., says that small church pastors need to listen to their church's story, slowing down to notice and hear things that pass by if they have too much of their own agenda. He goes on to say that small church pastors need to recognize that their church has leaders and that pastors are called to mentor these leaders one-to-one, over time, resourcing them and not taking away their leadership in times of struggle. Relationships are at the center of small church life, it is through relationships that creativity comes, gifts are identified and shared, generosity is evoked and ministry is offered. Worshipers in small churches expect to be participants, to be healed and to heal, to be touched by something holy, to be challenged and equipped. Because small churches are not typically very programmed during weekdays, gathering on Sundays for worship, fellowship, study, mission and the business of the church is vitally important. It is on Sunday that the community of faith gathers and spends time together, so small church pastors need to be fully present on Sundays.

For the past six months a group of small church Wisconsin UCC pastors have been meeting to study, discuss, pray and support each other in their ministries. Just like larger church pastors need support to minister in their particular setting, so too do small church pastors need to develop their skills for small church leadership. This group recommends the following books as helpful resources to small church pastors, rural, urban and everywhere in between:

- *The Celebration of Smallness*, a pamphlet by Samuel J. Wylie
- *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* by David Ray
- *The Big Small Church Book* by David Ray
- *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church* by Anna B. Olson
- *Small, Strong Congregations* by Kennon L. Callahan
- *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century* by Carl S. Dudley

Small churches make up the vast majority of Christian churches in the United States and more of our mid-size churches are becoming small. Small churches have proven to be phenomenally resilient, but only when they celebrate their particular ministries and embrace God's particular calling for them. Pastoral leadership development is essential to our small UCC churches and the gifts, qualities and faith of these pastors are unique to their settings. To **Be The Small Church** requires an affirmation of what Jesus taught us about being God's people, the sacredness of each life and generous, forgiving attentiveness to each day.