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Small Churches:

dynamics, challenges and opportunities

An account of a project within the Baptist Union of Great Britain to discover what has been happening among its small churches and to seek ways of encouraging and supporting them.

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Introduction

In 1984, a report entitled *Half the Denomination* addressed the issue of the small churches in the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB). It gave the following statistics (for 1982), alongside which are set the figures for 2003 (the latest available):

Number of members In the church	1982	2003
1-50	48%	52%
51-100	27%	26%
101-200	17%	16%
201-300	5%	4%
301+	3%	2%

A glance at the table shows that little appears to have changed in 21 years. The proportion of small churches has risen by 4%, and with it the total (especially as the number of churches in BUGB rose from 2052 in 1982 to 2115 today). They are not all the **same** churches, of course, as many have closed and been replaced by new church plants. (In the same period, the number of people in membership of BUGB churches fell from 168,500 to 141,000.)

Half the Denomination raised the profile of small churches but there were few tangible outcomes, largely because no delivery system was in place and the group that had written and presented the report disintegrated.

21 years later, the BUGB Council received another report on its small churches. The decision was made to define a small church as one with 40 members or fewer (though some argued for 30, and even for 25). 951 BUGB churches fall into that category, out of 2115, which accounts for some 13% of people in membership of BUGB churches.

The aims of the Small Churches project were:

- to investigate what is happening among small churches (mainly quantitative research)
- to listen to what leaders and members of small churches are saying (qualitative research)
- to investigate ways of supporting and enhancing the ministry and mission of small churches
- to improve the quality and health of life in small churches

It was also stated that it was **not** the aim to turn all small churches into large ones - though such outcomes would not be entirely unwelcome! Opinion is divided between those who are content to see a smallish number of large churches and those who would rather see a large number of small churches (a position espoused by many on the emerging church scene). Health and vitality are regarded as more important than size.

There was a clear intention from the outset that this research project should have tangible outcomes, and produce a measurable effect on the life of BUGB small churches in the long term. Although the research has been completed and presented to BUGB, the Project continues and ongoing work of implementing change has barely begun (and is likely to take several years).

An ecumenical note: all the historic denominations in the UK have substantial numbers of small churches, and taking the smallest 7,500 Anglican and 7,500 Free churches, the average congregation would number only 20.

Project Methodology (the project had a small steering group)

1. Information Gathering (*January to September 2004*)
2. Analysis and interpretation of Information by staff member (me) and augmented steering group (*October to November 2004*)
3. Draft proposals drawn up and sent to departments, colleges, associations and networks for comment and response (*November to December 2004*)
4. Presentation to BUGB Council, followed by substantial group work and plenary (*March 2005*)
5. Establishment of Implementation Group to drive the work forward (April 2005)

1 The Information Gathering Process

This was the first phase of the Project and was done in the following ways:

- A large amount of information was culled from BUGB statistics
- Questionnaires were sent to a sample of 150 small churches (of which 125 replied). The sample was divided roughly equally between churches with a membership of 1-20 and those with a membership of 21-40.
- All associations were invited to set up Focus Groups, and many held more than one.
- Invitations to submit ideas went to a number of networks, committees and BUGB departments; and further material came from a seminar at the Baptist Assembly, and spontaneously from individuals.

Before moving on to the main findings, it is worth commenting that the project has found a ready and often very enthusiastic welcome in many quarters. The very process of inviting leaders of small churches to share their experiences (good and bad) in itself proved to be an encouragement and also a signal to them that the wider Baptist family was not ignoring them; in fact, three associations spontaneously decided to set up networks for leaders of small churches as a direct result of organising a focus group for this project. More networks are likely to follow. The very high return rate for questionnaires (125 out of 150) is a further indication of the importance attached to the project by people in small churches.

2 What is going on among BUGB Small Churches?

2.1 *A few statistics*

Although the figures are not entirely reliable, there is evidence of modest growth in total membership of small churches between 1997 and 2002. It was the **smaller** small churches (1-20 members) that provided this growth, with fractional decline among the churches with 21-40 members.

When we investigated the age profile of small churches we discovered that broadly speaking **the smaller the church the higher the average age of its members is likely to be**. Church plants are very different in this respect, of course.

As regards the distribution of small churches in sociological areas, there is a fairly even distribution between the categories urban, rural and other (meaning small towns, suburbia and such like). Rural areas have the highest proportion of small churches; urban and 'other' areas having significantly more churches which are not small.

In the ten years to 2003, 91 new churches were born and 6 of these died within that ten-year period. (For comparison, some 80 churches were closed during the same period). Of the 72 new churches that have given data recently:

16 had 1-20 members
 28 had 21-40 members
 24 had more than 40 members.

2.2 Findings from the Questionnaire

Question One

Listed in the table below are some of the features of Small Churches that are often regarded as being to their advantage.

Please indicate on a scale of 1 to 4 how significant an advantage you consider each one to be in your church - a higher score means this is more of a feature in our church.

	Min	Mean
Friendly atmosphere	2	3.84
Everyone knows everyone	2	3.56
Prayer needs can be shared quickly with people likely to understand them	2	3.47
Pastoral support can be offered swiftly	2	3.38
Opportunities for the willing to get involved	1	3.29
Decisions can be made quickly and informally	1	3.17
Flexible structures	1	2.79
Able to grasp mission opportunities quickly	1	2.38

Sadly, the **lowest score in this section went to able to grasp mission opportunities quickly!**

Question Two

Listed in the table below are some of the features of Small Churches that are often regarded as being to their disadvantage. Please indicate on a scale of 1 to 4 how significant a disadvantage you consider each one to be in your church. [4 is high, 1 is low]

	Min	Mean
Too few people to do things	1	3.23
Demands of legislation: Disability Discrimination Act	1	2.37
Restricted quality of music ministry	1	2.29
Shortage of money	1	2.20
Unsatisfactory buildings	1	2.07
Demands of legislation: Child Protection	1	2.05
Impossible to remain anonymous	1	1.99
Lack of ideas	1	1.77
Lack direction	1	1.74
Leadership is weak	1	1.57
Discontinuity in pulpit ministry	1	1.40

Question Three

This asked where churches would turn for help. **The Association and churches of other denominations** came ahead of **BUGB**, with **nearby large churches, Cluster, and Baptist Colleges** at the bottom.

Question Four

This covered ministry and leadership. Whilst 33 / 125 of our sample had a paid full-time minister (almost all from the 21-40 size bracket), many small churches had to use considerable ingenuity to provide themselves with any form of consistent leadership.

One reply deserves to be quoted in full: *Elder-in-charge [unpaid] also acts as secretary / treasurer / organist / Sunday school leader [with wife].*

Question Five:

There are dozens of ways for churches to reach out to their community, from ALPHA to a luncheon club. Please outline briefly what your church is doing to reach your community with the Good News.

[This and other open-ended questions have been collated into tally form to give a crude analysis of the situation.]

The total number of projects listed here is 358, which was an impressive score for 125 small churches!

Good News to the Community	Tally
Children's / youth clubs	49
Alpha / similar	38
Community project involvement	24
Parent support	24
Coffee mornings	21
Magazine/leaflet drops	19
Lunches	18
Guest/alternative services	15
Personal involvement	13
Socials	13
School involvement (assemblies etc)	11
Work with elderly	11
Meetings	10
Prayer	10
Special events at harvest, Christmas etc	10
(a further 14 categories scored below 10)	

n = 125

Question Six

This asked about **Foreseeable opportunities**, and the main answers included:

- outreach
- youth work
- community work / links
- spiritual growth/nurture
- relationship-building

Question Seven

This asked about **the main obstacles**, and answers included:

- elderly congregation
- finances
- building problems
- more tasks than capable people
- finding Leadership
- lack of youth and families

- community relations
- lack of ministry
- lack of numbers

The number of opportunities (Q.6) and obstacles (Q.7) roughly balance each other – 260 to 274!

Question Eight

When asked what the **Association and the Union** could do for them, the main answers were:

- encourage larger churches to get involved with small churches
- provide finance
- say some **thank yous**
- encourage / include small churches in activities
- provide training

Differentiation

We wanted to try to discover if subdividing our sample according to size or location produced any significant variations from the overall answers. There were some minor variations (surprisingly few), and these can be summarised as:

- The **smallest churches** tend to be struggling considerably more with quality of music ministry, discontinuous preaching, and leadership being weak.
- The **rural village churches** find the 'flexible' issues (decisions quick and informal, flexible structures and grasp mission opportunities) an advantage more than the other categories.
- The **rural village churches** anticipated the least opportunities.
- **Council estate churches** find the quality of their music more restricted than do others.
- For **all but council estate churches**, an elderly congregation was the most often cited difficulty.

2.3 Findings from the Focus Groups

The groups were structured with similar headings to those on the Questionnaire, and the findings were fairly similar. Those who attended Focus Groups tended to be very committed to the life of their small church, though not necessarily blind to its faults and struggles!

The strong messages about the advantages of being in a small church were:

- People know each other well and are valued; close, family feel; friendly & informal
- There is a job for everyone
- Teamwork, commitment & ownership
- Simpler, flexible structures
- Relatively easy to give a warm, personal welcome
- Small reaches out to local community
- Pastoral needs made known (and met)

These negatives all scored strongly:

- Not enough manpower / too many jobs to be done
- Limited finances and resources
- Limitations in conducting worship
- Vulnerable to one member or family's leaving / coming / domination

Suggested likely sources of help were mainly relational:

- Partnership with larger churches
- Resources database (could one be set up nationally?)
- Small churches to network within the association
- Link with other groups e.g. Boys Brigade, Salvation Army, local authority
- Improve clusters

The plea to BUGB was basically to visit and encourage small churches, dispel the misconception that it sees large churches as 'right', and to be more creative in the use of Home Mission funding.

3 Dynamics of the small church

One very clear message that emerged repeatedly from the project was this: **a small church is not the same thing as a scaled down large church** (even if some actually had been much larger at some point in their history). There is an assumption that a church of, say, 70-100 members is a typical Baptist church and therefore a church of 30 or 40 members should be regarded as an emaciated version of this model.

If leaders and members of small churches could genuinely feel that their church (perhaps with thirty members) has an integrity and dynamic of its own rather than being a pale imitation of a large church, there would be an immensely liberating effect. Along with this message goes the need to say to small churches: **play to your many strengths.**

Another frequent plea encountered during the project was along these lines: **we haven't enough people to do all the jobs.** There is another false assumption here that needs to be challenged, namely that a small church has to perform a certain number of 'jobs' in order to justify its existence. Many small churches do think in these terms, simply because they are trying to act as medium-sized or large churches. Instead of bemoaning the shortage of people to do jobs, the attention needs to be focussed on how many jobs are being attempted. No church of any size ever feels it has 'enough people to do jobs' but for a small church the issue is acute. It would be much more effective in kingdom terms if it would adopt a principle of attempting only what it can realistically do, and doing that well. **Not enough people for jobs must become only enough jobs for the available people.**

The small church's perception of itself also has implications for its structures. Some small churches have a structure identical to that of churches five or ten times their size, with a full quota of deacons, committees, organisations and such like. Where a church is the equivalent of maybe two housegroups in actual size, it is surely possible to make day-to-day and month-to-month decisions flexibly, whilst maintaining the legalities of having a group (such as deacons) as trustees.

It would be dishonest to give the impression that all small churches are warm, outward-looking and ready to embrace change. In the course of the Project, some of the more worrying features of some small churches have repeatedly come to light, and these need to be listed:

- vulnerability to fluctuations in membership
- vulnerability to domination by one individual or family, and to self-appointed leaders
- resistance to change, preferring to wither and die as they are than contemplate change
- siege mentality, with hanging on seen as their over-riding value
- no contact with their community, indeed seen as a refuge from it
- grim premises

Linked to this, comes the final point about the dynamic of small churches. Where a church is insecure, and perhaps fearful about its future, there is a natural tendency to conservatism and sticking to past methods. However, this attitude is frequently part of the problem. From a logical point of view, for a struggling church to go on doggedly doing things that have brought it to that point would seem to be a formula for extinction. A culture of risk-taking would be far more productive – particularly as many small churches have little to lose!

4 Small churches and large churches

There were frequent references to the issue of larger churches partnering to help smaller ones. Some of these were impassioned pleas, even delivered with a measure of resentment that churches that were well-resourced in terms of people and finance were ignoring the needs of their smaller sister churches.

By definition, this issue touches all of us, whether in a small church or a larger one. There is an obvious logic in resources being shared in order to bolster the work in a small church that may be at risk because its own resources are slim. However, large churches are often unenthusiastic about pleas for such partnerships, perhaps regarding them as a potential drain on their resources and a diversion from their own calling.

Small churches sometimes expressed fears that inviting a larger church for help would result in colonisation or even a take-over. Underlying such fears may lurk a determination to change nothing, thus expecting the larger church to subsidise an unsustainable pattern of church life.

5 Ministry in small churches

Our research indicated that small churches frequently have to exercise incredible ingenuity to organise regular ministry. While the larger church can simply apply to the National Settlement Team, the small church is dependent on finding individuals locally who are both gifted and willing to undertake ministry, either as volunteers in their spare time or in some part-time capacity. There appears to be a fairly widespread assumption that better ministers will inevitably find their way into larger churches (the so-called career structure for pastors). Such an assumption, admittedly based on a certain amount of common sense and fact, does have the effect of saying to our smaller churches that second-class is good enough for them.

One positive feature to emerge was that over 80% of the accredited female ministers in pastorates are ministering in small churches. While there are urgent questions being asked about why this percentage should be so high, it does mean that some very able female ministers are to be found in small churches.

The BUGB Home Mission system gives grants on a top-up basis to churches wanting full-time accredited ministers (where the church's own resources fall a little way short). However, the smallest churches, with no prospect of being in a position to apply for such grants, are nevertheless contributing to the Home Mission pot – thus subsidising ministry in churches with more resources than themselves. There is an "underclass" of such churches, and a more flexible redrafting of Home Mission rules would be needed if they were to receive denominational support for part-time or unaccredited ministry.

6 The voice of small churches

There is evidence that members of small churches are under-represented on BUGB Council, denominational committees and working groups, though this trend is less marked at association level. The result is that the views of those in small churches are unwittingly bypassed in framing policy and making decisions. There is a need to make sure that the Union is user-friendly to smaller churches, and certainly to avoid measures that have the effect of discriminating against them. The fact that someone is a member of a small church does not mean that they have nothing to offer the denomination!

7 Small churches and the association

In many instances, small churches rightly look to their association for help, encouragement, advice and sustenance, and are grateful to find it offered in generous measure. Indeed, it is often the comment of association staff that it is their large churches that stand aloof from association life, maintaining that they have no need of the association's services. Largely based on good current practice, the following is offered as an outline for an association's strategy towards its small churches:

7.1 *Clusters*

Clusters are informal groupings of churches for the purpose of mission, and they could be encouraged to regard themselves as support units for their smaller churches.

7.2 *Consultancy*

The experience so far gained from the Union's embryonic consultancy programme is of the powerful effect of someone *from outside* coming in and spending time helping a church evaluate its mission and ministry, and then look for ways forward. This is true for small churches and for large. Sometimes the effect can be of liberation from the past and past expectations, in favour of "permission" to experiment creatively. The association is ideally placed to introduce the *outsider* and the BUGB consultancy programme is very firmly association-centred to that end.

7.3 *Strategic support groups*

These would free small churches from some of the routine tasks that often practically sink them, by looking for people within the association who could fulfil certain roles, for example that of Treasurer. Again, someone with professional knowledge of buildings and the stewardship of buildings could relieve a small church of a major burden and source of worry by acting as a consultant / steward for these matters.

7.4 *Preaching resources*

The familiar Lay Preachers Associations might give way to databases of approved preachers (noting their specialities) and the association might find people to draft material to be followed by visiting preachers, in this way helping both preacher and congregation.

7.5 *Moderators*

Where a small church loses its minister the help of the association would normally be sought in seeking future ministry. It could ensure that whoever is drafted in as a Moderator has an understanding of the dynamics of a small church.

7.6 *Closures*

The association is almost always drawn in when a church closure is on the agenda. Some work is being done in order to help regional staff and churches ensure that

closures can be as painless as possible, including looking creatively at what might happen to any resources released by the closure of a church.

7.7 Resurrections / Replants

There will be occasions where a church that is due for closure is actually situated in a community where there are great opportunities for mission, and it may have buildings that could be a major asset. What church planters often refer to as a **resurrection/replant** is when, in effect, a new church grows out of one that is closing. Some of the original people may remain, although most of the new impetus would come from an influx of new people, and the church would be set up on a new footing from the old one. Strategic decisions need to lie behind such a procedure and clearly the association is best placed to make such decisions.

8 Training

Discussions are planned with the colleges regarding student placements. With the church-based model of training now dominant, most students will find themselves pastoring a small church as part of their training. This is often of immense benefit to the small church itself and, of course, gives the student an opportunity to develop his or her gifting and gain valuable experience. However, the suggestion has been made that the longer-term effect on 'client churches', some of which have had a long sequence of different student ministers, may not be altogether healthy. Has the fact that they have bought into this arrangement actually inhibited their vision and growth? Further research is required.

It is clearly a good sign that a number of students each year settle in their student placement. This must indicate that overall the experience has been good. However, the question remains: are such placements regarded as little more than nurseries where inexperienced student ministers can make their mistakes and learn their trade before moving on to bigger and better things? College courses do not include specific training in the dynamics of small churches, as evidenced by a recent plea for help from a newly qualified minister struggling in her small church because her college placement had been in a large one.

Member colleges of BUGB are making an increasing and much appreciated contribution to training for lay people, and there could be more training specifically for people leading or about to lead small churches, and perhaps also for the denomination at large in order to increase understanding of what small churches are really like, and what they are trying to achieve. Even the deliberate choice of a small church as the venue for training (and other) events sends out a good message.

9 Evangelism

The statistics indicate that our small churches are actually quite effective in bringing people to faith in Christ. Further, many relational evangelistic methods employed in larger churches are based on small groups – and the small church is at no disadvantage here. Further research work is required here, simply asking the question: **What approaches and methods fit well with small churches?**

10 Children, young people and families

This is an area in which most small churches struggle, and about which they can often feel either guilty or despairing, or perhaps both. Where children and young people are concerned, a critical mass numerically is the key. If a church has a vibrant work among children or

teenagers, it will in all likelihood be able to attract even more. However, once the church has only a handful of young people, only the very faithful (almost certainly children of church members) are likely to stay. Those who persevere may find themselves confronted with provision that is far from satisfactory.

The small church also tends to lose out when a Christian family moves into a new area. They are much more likely to try out and ultimately settle in a larger church:

- because larger churches are more visible and therefore easier to find
- because they perceive that there is a much higher likelihood that their family's needs will be catered for.

However, it seems unlikely that the Lord wants Christian families on the move to settle only in large churches.

Perhaps the only viable approach is to encourage small churches to work together with others. The 'critical mass' of children and young people might be achieved in this way and by pooling the gifted leaders that are available high quality youth work might be possible. *

On a somewhat different tack, it should be recognised that young families are not the be-all and end-all of church life. Small churches need to hear that. Some members of small churches can give the impression that all the church's problems would be at an end if it were able to attract young families, and this is not the case. Equally, some churches will always have a high age profile because of their geographical setting, for example in a retirement area. Rather than bemoan the fact, the message is to get on with pursuing God's calling to them in their situation.

11 Worship

If people in small churches have an image of worship based on their experience at large-scale events like *Spring Harvest*, they are bound to be disappointed by their typical Sunday service. But large venues, large numbers and large worship bands are not essential to the worship of God.

So what are the strengths of a smaller group in worship? The most obvious one would seem to be in the area of communion. Where two or three-dozen people come together around the Lord's Table, they can do that very simply and meaningfully as a genuine family who know each other.

Secondly, worship can be tailored to the needs and tastes of a small congregation. Intercessory prayer, for example, can readily focus on individual and even personal issues (where appropriate) and can more easily be conducted as 'open prayer' than in a larger context. We should re-think what preaching could be in the small church, exploring the opportunity to release preaching from the stranglehold of the monologue imposed when Christians began to meet in large buildings, with services led by professional clergy. Preaching involving dialogue with the congregation could prove fruitful.

Many respondents mentioned problems with music, where musicians and singers are few and neither willing nor able. Careful choice of music can avoid some pitfalls, and help may be at hand from new technologies in two forms:

- there are now several electronic instruments on the market that can sound convincing and acceptable, even in the hands of the relative novice
- there are several excellent systems for using pre-recorded music and backing tracks, based on the more popular collections of hymns and songs.

A comprehensive training package on *Worship in the Small Church* is being planned.

Conclusion

The BUGB Small Churches project is much more than a piece of research, though it is research-based. The intention, all along, has been to impact the lives of BUGB small churches for the better by moving from research and analysis into concerted action. This will be done through an **Implementation Group**, which holds the following brief:

- to dialogue with BUGB departments, associations and colleges regarding the detailed proposals relevant to them
- to monitor progress with each body
- to report on progress to BUGB Council (and perhaps the Trustees)
- to bring to Council any recommendations necessary to implement new initiatives
- to promote the cause of small churches and the Project throughout the Union

Time will tell whether this piece of work is more productive than *Half the Denomination*.

- to produce mp3 files via ?