

Small is beautiful?

By PETER BENTLEY

It is now well established that the majority of congregations in the United Church are small. Yes, there are large churches, especially where several congregations have combined to form one single congregation parish, but mostly our congregations hover around the 50 mark.

Small churches are not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, Kennon Callahan has indicated that churches should aim to be either small (around 50) or large (over 200), unless the church is performing a specialist ministry. He sees these churches as the future of the institutional church.

What seems to be the problem is that the UC structure does not really recognise the different circumstances of small churches. Financial and ministry difficulties are swept under the carpet by amalgamating small churches into a parish structure (though not all the difficulties are solved here, either!).

At the parish level the problems of the small church are compounded. Local ministry resources are stretched and exhausted by continual in-fighting. Those small churches which lack powerful leaders or sufficient resources are relegated to the status of 'poor cousin'. A cycle of entrenched poverty is enforced. Perhaps some people hope that the small churches will eventually wither away?

Smaller churches can provide an environment which is sadly lacking in modern life. Certainly larger churches can provide intimacy and community within groups or cells, but their structure can also mitigate against relational development. Smaller



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churches are like families, in that it is less easy to hide internal conflicts and problems.

They can also concentrate hope and joy in a personal way which larger groups often find difficult. People in transition, seeking help and support, will be less threatened by a smaller group than a large bustling church in which most people seem to be in control. The struggle for intimacy and community is a unifying facet of a smaller church.

Support? nurture?

How can the wider church support and nurture local churches? How can it enable parishes to function better? It is time to look seriously at these questions. I will make some suggestions and these will hopefully stimulate other people to contribute to dialogue and action.

We need non-stipendiary or semi-stipendiary ministry. Rather than seeing it as paramount that parishes have a full-time minister, we should investigate the

possibility of part-time ministers with defined congregational responsibilities. Lay leaders could form part of a team to consolidate local ministry. This may help financially pressured parishes. By encouraging congregational growth, hopefully congregations will be better able to support the parish and the wider church.

Lay people may be ordained for specific tasks, including the celebration of the sacraments. This would enable the part-time or full-time ordained minister flexibility within the parish. It would also reduce the questionable role of the 'sacramental stranger', who arrives to perform the necessary rituals when the regular minister is unavailable.

We need to spread our resources to encourage semi-stipendiary ministry. Rather than having one or two manses let at commercial rates while ministers are resident in a home of their choice, offer

Continued page 49►

From page 48

the manses to lay people in return for specified duties. This would also help those parishes who are reliant on 'manse rent' to rethink their whole operation and deployment of these scarce resources.

Smaller churches would benefit from a personal ministry centred on the congregation. Perhaps the parish's richer churches — and those in the wider church — would have to subsidise this. In less wealthy parishes a united move to less expensive ordained ministry would offset any loss of income from 'manse rent'.

Stronger links needed

We need to provide the local congregation with better links to synod and its various boards, and to presbytery. At present the structure of information dissemination is parish-biased. It is too easy for a congregation to be isolated and deprived of access to the other levels of church government. The location of part-time ministers (lay or ordained) in local churches and their designation as contact people for the wider Church should streamline information dissemination and encourage open access and feedback.

Smaller churches need structures which suit their circumstances. Why can't we have different methods of operation for different churches? At least, we could think about affirming what is already happening. When a system doesn't work it only encourages people to circumvent the official ways and perhaps eventually move to a 'Claytons association' with the Church. Alternatively, we could continue to wait until more small churches are clinically dead. ■



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seeks enquiries from persons wishing to be considered for the position of

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The role of the Secretary is crucial to the mission thrust of the Church, and will involve pastoral, advisory and administrative functions.

This is a senior executive position within the Synod of Tasmania, and is open to members of the Uniting Church, either lay or ordained.

Commencement date is January 1992.

The duties of a Secretary of Synod are set out in the Regulations (3.5.23), however those considering the position should obtain full details from the Chairman of the Selection Committee:

Rev J.L. Pettman, Moderator,
The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Tasmania,
P.O. Box 46, Westbury, Tasmania 7303.

Applications close 31 March 1991.

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calls for applications for

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2. to undertake extensive visitation of parishes in a programme of education for mission;
3. To recruit and minister to persons appointed by the Assembly to partner church and other fields of service;
4. To share in the co-operative team ministry within the Board.

The position is open to members of the Uniting Church in Australia, lay or ordained. A full job description is available on request.

All applicants should include a statement on an understanding of mission, a curriculum vitae and the names of three referees.

Address all correspondence to: The General Secretary, NSW Synod Board of Mission, P.O. Box E178, St James, NSW, 2000.

Applications close 15 April, 1991.