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“Where Two or Three Are Gathered”  
Prophetic Disruption of the New Religious Marketplace

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Doctor of Ministry

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## **Abstract**

### **“Where Two or Three Are Gathered” Prophetic Disruption of the New Religious Marketplace By Jeremy D. Battle**

In the advent of disenchantment and secularization, religious life has seen significant declines and many churches have closed their doors. On the other hand, some churches have survived and are thriving in this new climate through innovations in marketing and branding, evangelism and outreach, and church growth strategies. The marrying of these features of disenchantment and growth have created a New Religious Marketplace. Churches, ministers, and ministries are now ranked, reviewed, followed, liked/dis-liked, and are treated like a marketplace of beliefs, alternatives, and services. Bigger and wealthier churches wield disproportional influence in the market, while small, under-resourced churches have struggled. Concrete social realities and disparities are disguised and distorted in the New Religious Marketplace and what is meant by “good” church options. These lines of disparity tend to follow what W.E.B. DuBois called “the color line”—and what may seem to be solely a matter of money and “good” church is actually a troubling combination of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors – what ethicists call “intersectionality.” This project will outline the disparities at play when you look at (a) full-time versus bi-vocational pastors, (b) hired vs. volunteer staff members, (c) inequitable distributions of discretionary time of volunteers, (d) and access to financial capital from lending institutions for buildings and space. What are small churches (who make up more than 85% of churches) to do? They should do as Jesus did when he prophetically disrupted the marketplace culture of the Jewish Religious Order and Draconian state during his ministry. Small churches should also follow the prophetic model of the Black Church, which has operated outside of the mainstream in the U.S. and has survived and succeeded through Antebellum, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, until today. I will end by celebrating the benefits of small church using my own case experiences as an African- American pastor and PK, and from over twenty years of experience serving in churches of every size across the U.S. with varying economic, racial, and denominational makeups. These experiences formed my deep appreciation for the church, and the specific challenges that are often unique to small churches.

“Where Two or Three Are Gathered”:  
Prophetic Disruption of the New Religious Marketplace

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Church membership in the US has plummeted by over 20% in the last twenty years, and many attribute it to the rise in public distrust of the church, coupled with the overall changing landscape of belief and the practice of faith (Crary 2019). Many church leaders are desperately trying to survive by becoming strategists of church growth and innovation, discipleship, and evangelism. These strategies have not worked for some and have thus led to many burnouts, church closures, and an overall undertone of despair among clergy as this new religious landscape takes no prisoners. People are increasingly critical and review/rating-oriented, especially in the rise of ecommerce and social media, and this has certainly had an impact on people's already hypercritical view of the church. Growing churches today are often marked by their marketing, outreach and evangelism edge, in an increasingly judgmental society that expects to see innovation, web-presence and traffic, appeal, and resonance. As a response to this new landscape, I believe that a "New Religious Marketplace" (henceforth NRM) has been birthed and a church's survival is based on their ability to adjust around the marketplace and to innovatively connect their message with their prospective audience.

The new demands on churches and pastors to be relevant and attractive are steep and can easily distract the Christian church from arguably executing its central mission to make disciples of Jesus (Idleman 2016). I will discuss the NRM based on my experiences as an African-American pastor who grew up in the Post-Civil Rights Birmingham, Alabama. My analyses are also anchored by my experiences serving in churches of every size across the U.S. with varying economic, racial, and denominational makeups for over twenty years. These

experiences form my deep appreciation for the church, and the specific challenges that are often unique to small churches.

I believe that small churches should challenge the NRM as Jesus disrupted the marketplace culture of the temple (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-16), and also as the Black Church has historically modeled operating outside of the mainstream. The NRM has developed new definitions and perceptions of God and goodness, where public opinion, reviews, and ratings seem to be God and the arbiter and judge of all things right. People now consider churches and ministers options and products to choose from. The market ultimately ranks churches and clergy based on their perception of the quality of their goods and services, which equates to their perception of the church's effectiveness. This marketplace culture holds that churches should wield a demonstrable qualitative and quantifiable impact on people through its web and physical traffic, and the church's collection of ministries and overall programs and services. People now treat the diversity of churches like goods and services, as products and commodities in a shopping cart. In the *Market is God*, Harvey Cox argues that people assign value and deify people and institutions strictly according to their monetary value (Cox 2016). I would like to further nuance this point by noting that when people articulate a desire to attend and participate in a "good" church, they often blindly reemphasize racial and wealth disparities. According to a 2016 Pew Research report, churchgoers have growing expectations from churches that span from good preaching, authentic hospitality and a welcoming atmosphere, to children's programming (Pew 2016). What the general public might miss are the larger implications and problems that underlie "good" definitions of ministry. In fact, I am afraid that the body of Christ has now taken the poor, pan-African, Palestinian-Jew and

co-opted Him to fit a larger narrative of status and wealth. In the contemporary Christian's view of what a good church is, many Christians would probably walk right past Jesus and His disciples, and a good number of them may be doing this right now. They may ignore significant ministries in small, un-named, underdeveloped, and understaffed churches in order to find a "good" a.k.a. "big" church. Additionally, there are a number of societal and economic disparities at play when people simply rate a good church.

My goal is not to diagnose or provide causal observations for these disparities in general, but rather to uplift a few of the underlying factors I have observed over the years, in conversations with other pastors, and in larger research of the modern day church. My observations also come from over twenty years of experience serving in churches of every size (large, medium, and small), across regions in the U.S. (South, Southwest, West, Northeast), with varying economic, racial, and denominational makeups. These experiences have coalesced and formed my deep appreciation for the church, and the specific challenges that are often unique to smaller churches. I do not want to disparage the significant work done in large ministries, but instead put into perspective the perceptions of small and medium sized churches who actually represent over 85% of churches around the world (Bradley 2017). Christian pastors and churchgoers alike, should exercise significant caution when drawing conclusions about "good" churches, because that distinction often disguises unnamed biases and privileges rooted in wealth and economic disparities. What is often missing from good church conversations are the undergirding disparities of power, privilege, race, and wealth (Edwards 2008, Rah 2016). Enormous disparities stand behind people's perceptions of "good" churches. Concrete social realities are disguised and distorted in the NRM. When someone articulates that a church is "good," he or she is often

making a value statement about the distribution and affluence of wealth in that community. There are significant disparities in the operations of congregations with significant financial means versus those with less means; this is heightened when you look at (a) Marketing and Media, (b) full-time versus bi-vocational pastors, (c) hired vs. volunteer staff members, (d) the discretionary time of lay members and volunteers, and (e) church buildings and space. These lines of disparity, moreover, tend to follow what W.E.B. DuBois called “the color line.” As I hope to show, what may seem to be solely a matter of money is actually a troubling combination of racial, class, gender, and ethnic factors – what ethicists call “intersectionality.” My project therefore intends to prophetically call out the biases, prejudices, and idolatries that are disguised in the New Religious Marketplace, in people’s expectations of churches, and how people ultimately rank “good churches” today.

What are small churches (who make up more than 85% of churches) to do? They should do as Jesus did when he prophetically disrupted the marketplace culture of the Jewish Religious Order and Draconian state during his ministry. Small churches should also follow the prophetic model of the Black Church, which has operated outside of the mainstream in the U.S. and has survived and succeeded through Antebellum, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, until today. I want to caution small churches neither to sell out in the NRM, nor to discredit their purpose. I want to caution against confusing privilege with God and successful, fruitful ministry-as poor, under-resourced congregations in store-fronts and small buildings across the world are also doing powerful ministry that may not be reflected in the building itself. If this were true, what might our ancestors who worshipped in tabernacles and tents say? They would not fit the bill of having a “good” house of worship according to this new paradigm. My ultimate



goal is to celebrate the benefits that are naturally ingrained in small churches that will allow them to thrive in the New Religious Marketplace. I will use my own case experiences to offer strategies and innovations that can help small churches sharpen their gifts, and ultimately illustrate that “small ain’t so bad” and “big ain’t so good”. I will conclude by encouraging small churches to embrace Nehemiah’s declaration to “Stay on the Wall”.

### **DEFINING THE NEW RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE**

The New Religious Marketplace describes the way churches, churchgoers, and the public have started to think about religious engagement today. In this new paradigm, public opinion, reviews, and ratings (which are key components of the marketplace) seem to be God and the arbiter and judge of all things right. People now consider churches and ministers options and products to choose from. The market ultimately ranks churches and clergy based on their perception of the quality of their goods and services, which equates to their perception of the church’s effectiveness. This marketplace mentality believes that churches should wield a demonstrable qualitative and quantifiable impact on people through its web and physical traffic, and the church’s collection of ministries and overall programs and services. In the New Religious Marketplace, engagement with churches has become increasingly transactional at every level, and the term “church service(s)” is not helping. People now treat the diversity of churches like goods and services, as products and commodities in a shopping cart.

In response to the crises of declining religiosity churches may have unknowingly conceded to and exacerbated people’s obsession with transactions. In order to fill empty pews and reach the lost, oftentimes churches have positioned themselves as ad agencies who advertise their products and services rather than prioritizing heart work. Others have observed that ministries

should be cautious to not be lured into the marketplace's obsession with growth through transactions rather than transformation (Haney 2018).

Yet the greater question is whether the people in the New Religious Marketplace desire transformation. In this new landscape, I am afraid that the church or churchgoers are not interested in transformation and the close connection required to authentically be in a relationship with the church or God. Instead, everyone enjoys keeping a safe distance, which could explain the appeal to larger churches. I have often heard people say they enjoy big churches because they could get in and out, not talk to anyone, and mind their own business.

The New Religious Marketplace's expectations for and emphasis on transactions reflects the new culture that dominates economic, social, and political relations in the world. It has in turn created a new system of virtues and rules of engagement that overlook true connection. We live in an environment where the number of Facebook friends equates to friendship, and the number of likes equates to a strong following. Yet the majority of these interactions are transactional and surface, lacking the intimacy of deep connection. In some ways, larger churches struggle with this issue more because people may prefer to distance themselves through big and/or virtual spaces, rather than engage at the deeper level required for authentic relationships. In other words, bigger can appeal to those who want to hide-out or keep an arm's length between the church. The term church "service" may also create a hands-only culture in churches, where people are not required to engage heart and soul. Jesus laments that "people worship me with their mouth, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8). The church has to be careful to not surrender to the market and solely focus on providing popular church services without changing hearts.

More specifically, I believe that the true perception and drivers of what “good” churches look like in the New Religious Marketplace are actually based on (i) a ministry’s resources and ability to market and maintain a rich media profile, (ii) a church’s operations through its staff and volunteers, and (iii) the size and attractiveness of a ministry’s building and space. I am not suggesting these factors are mutually exclusive or devoid of transformative ministry. Yet I also believe people struggle to identify these “good” features in small churches. Those who do not have these good features and appeal are often marginalized. The number one question I (and many other pastors) are asked is: “How large is your congregation?,” which is a reflexive impulse in the market to “size” up a church’s impact and legitimacy. Ministers and churches are therefore judged by the size of their church and the scale of their services and alternatives, rather than their central mission and impact in their specific communities, which cannot be quantified. It’s the equivalent of judging someone based on what they have versus who they are.

Many of the market’s demands are driven simply by what people want and like and may not necessarily be in line with scripture. Further, these personal desires and demands do not necessarily take into account (and arguably do not care about) whether a church has the capacity, resources, or bandwidth to handle those demands - the market just simply wants what it wants. Many pastors therefore keep up with the demands of an increasingly critical and quantity-driven audience that is constantly administering valuations on churches (large and small).

This is especially true in transient cities like Cambridge, Massachusetts (where my church is based), where there is a “shopper mentality,” and people are constantly looking for *church options*. My church is constantly flooded with visitors that make up the large university student population and working professionals who are looking for a good place to worship. The phrase

“*church options*” seems to imply that looking for a church is a selection on a menu to suit one’s appetite. Similarly, the term church “service(s)” itself presents challenges in this new landscape because people may equate church ministries to add-on(s), upgrades, or amenities depending on what they are trying to obtain. People now think it is more critical to determine whether a church can effectively serve them instead of focusing on the importance of their own participation in the ongoing work of the church.

What is even more interesting is that people believe they want options; however, the highest rated institutions in the current marketplace often stand out because they tend to appeal to a larger or universal audience (Collins 2004). Further, research has shown that these institutions are often led by white or wealthy leaders (Gee 2018). What is often missing from good church conversations are the undergirding disparities of power, privilege, race, and wealth (Edwards 2008, Rah 2016). This makes the prospect of ministry and survival for those on the margins seem increasingly despairing, especially when those appeals are beyond their means. In other words, survival in this New Religious Marketplace is often determined by which churches have the greatest display of social status and wealth. Many pastors and churches despair about how to keep their churches open, especially given the new appeals driving growing churches in the market. Yet I would like to discuss the greater problems that are disguised in what people may consider good churches.

## **THE PERCEPTION OF “GOOD” CHURCH: MARKETING, MEDIA, AND THE IMPACT OF THE “INFLUENCER SPIRIT”**

Church today has evolved from its humble beginnings. The literal testimony of the early church was martyrdom as Christians shared the message of Christ against the mass Roman, draconian state (Grant 2004, Blount 2005). Good preachers in the New Testament church seemed to be poor zealots whose messages ministered to their contemporary masses on the margins of society. These messages alarmed the religious and state authorities as a form of terrorism, resulting in the manhunt, slaughter, and persecution of the Church. The hymns of early Christians were dirges that told of a new world to come, and their growth and attraction was based on miracles, signs and wonders.

Yet today we have a New Religious Marketplace where good preachers and churches are marked by their large digital and physical footprint. Marketing firms have vastly capitalized on this through search engine optimizations, and a host of platforms, driven by sales and earnings. In this environment dictated by the “influencer spirit,” the greatest influencers are determined by the number of followers, likes, popularity, and audience they can garner. An entire industry, marketplace, and way of life has emerged where friends, followers, likes and dislikes, and reputations are quantified and determined by ranks and reviews, and are ultimately monetized. In the case of churches and ministries in this new industry, the best market performers wield the most influence and traffic, and are ultimately perceived as the best models for Christian ministry. In other words, the New Religious Marketplace is driven by what people think of churches versus what God and scripture dictates. This is further exacerbated because wealthy ministries have the infrastructure and financial resources to establish their presence in the market, and also can afford

to pay for prime placements to optimize the most views and engagement. Wealthier churches can pay for their influence like any other secular business acquires customers.

I believe, however, that Christians must reject the “influencer spirit.” Churches should not get caught up in rating their ultimate impact, significance, success or failure, through perceptions of market appeal. Jesus taught that focusing on greatness and influence should not be our focus; however, when Jesus’ disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them he taught them that “the greatest among you must be a servant” (Matthew 23:11). In an age of disenchantment, the spirit of influence may be the most dominant force that directs the way people view the world and God. The spirit of influence is cut throat and arguably plays by objective numbers and rubrics that ultimately assign value and legitimacy on the highest performer. In this environment, ministers and churches are considered legitimate not by their saving faith, but rather by their influence.

Yet it's more complicated because the church is commanded by Jesus to do greater works to spread to gospel (John 14:12). I would therefore like to strike a balance, arguing that churches should use every resource and media to communicate the gospel to the world, while also being mindful that economic disparities may account for a given church’s ability to do so or not. The COVID-19 quarantine crisis is evidence that social media has merit, as it has allowed churches to stay connected beyond the four walls of our church buildings. Yet, the influencer spirit in our culture can disguise the benefits of social media if we are not careful, when churches and people confuse the grandiosity of a church’s media and productions with good gospel ministry. Wealth and resources is often the explanatory factor that indicates a church’s ability to have a robust, polished production and media presence- which most likely include a highly trained and paid staff

of graphic designers, videographers, singers and musicians, audio, visual, and lighting engineers. In the next section, I will further underscore how a church's finances operate in the backdrop of what people often perceive as "good" church operations.

Churches can easily become victims of the market when they place too much focus on their image and appeal, which is unable to capture the full picture of who they are. When who we are is a glimpse, a photo, or a commercial, we can lose our focus and be tossed by the unpredictability of the market. Jesus was not interested in the crowd and often criticized the motivations of those who followed him for the wrong reasons. He lamented that many only followed him for the benefits of fishes and loaves, and even miracles, with no desire to receive transformation through His teachings (John 6:26). He did not run after the crowd, nor look for a stage; he performed powerful ministry and transformed people, which spread one person at a time. Although Jesus did ask his disciples about what others said about him, He ultimately challenged them to define their own personal relationship with Him instead of worrying about what others said (Matthew 16:13-20).

In an age of hyper-market competition, small churches can often get entangled with trying to compete with a marketplace that favors the most well-known and wealthy. In the process some smaller institutions lose hope and heart because they are attempting to keep up. Although market trends and benchmarking are helpful, they can also have a destructive impact on churches and organizations when they become more concerned about keeping up than being who they are. Small churches must particularly be careful not to let expectations from the market and world drive our perception of what it means to do "good" ministry because the world and market expectations for religious life often skew the real witness of God and faith in the world (Cox

2016). What people come to expect and demand of churches and the value that they place on goodness and God-ness is not always consistent with the testimony of scripture.

On the other hand, I love following and listening to many ministries and ministers who are making a powerful impact and influence in the world. Many of them operate in larger ministries, and I believe people have an authentic resonance with and genuine connection to these ministries, albeit a large or megachurch. I am not suggesting that their influence, large memberships, or followers are insidious or ill-founded. I am simply suggesting that they must be led with caution, so neither the market nor people confuse a large platform as the sole definition of good ministry. Those ministries should not believe their own hype or press reports, and neither should we, as Jesus did not (Matthew 23:11). Like the caution parents take to celebrate all of their children, Christians should embrace the Apostle Paul's exhortation to honor the diversity of gifts and ministries that are represented in the entire body of Christ- which includes large, small, wealthy, and under-resourced churches. The same caution should be exercised when we evaluate "good" ministries based on operations and volunteerism.

### **THE PERCEPTION OF "GOOD" CHURCH OPERATIONS**

My church has seen an unfair amount of hits to its operations and leadership for several reasons. Even from its founding, it was sustained by working-class African-American migrants from the South who could only afford a stable to start its ministry in. Our church still primarily consists of persons with humble means, and this has been further exacerbated over the last thirty years. The city of Cambridge has seen astronomical increases in the cost of living, which were jump started by legislation that leveled rent control across the state of Massachusetts. As rent controlled units disappeared in the city, so did African-Americans, which impacted Black



churches across our city. Harvard and MIT started the expansion, alongside developers and corporations, eventually making the city of Cambridge the biotech-pharma capital of the world and one of the most expensive cities to live in the U.S. (Acitelli 2019). Significant disparities were exploited and solidified in a once rent-friendly, socioeconomically diverse Cambridge. This consequently forced the decline of attendance and membership in my church (and many other churches across the City of Cambridge). This decline was not due to disbelief or disenchantment among our members, or missteps from church pastors and leaders. The decline in lay leadership and our overall volunteer operations were a consequence of the death of rent control and the birth of gentrification- which ultimately drove Black families out of Cambridge, who used to walk down the street to our church. Volunteerism and attendance suffered greatly, reducing our once filled church to a faithful few. As the cost of living pressed our church population out of the city, commuting, volunteering, and attendance also declined. This decline compounded with the ongoing historical challenges that our church had to afford to hire staff members (including the pastor).

### **FULL-TIME VERSUS BI-VOCATIONAL PASTORS**

Due to financial constraints, many small churches cannot hire pastors to manage and execute the day-to-day operations of the church. My grandfather planted seven churches throughout Alabama during his lifetime, and my father and a host of uncles followed his lead in later years. All of them were bi-vocational, serving as miners, mechanics, and tradesmen during the day and then led their ministries after business hours and on the weekends. Like many church

leaders around the world, they had to be bi-vocational just to fulfill their call to ministry. Only in recent years was my congregation able to hire a full-time pastor, and it is well over 100 years old.

### **HIRED VERSUS VOLUNTEER STAFF**

Some churches have more economic capital to hire theologically trained and formally educated ministers to facilitate the ministry and work of the church. These wealthier institutions have dedicated staff members and others whose sole responsibility is to execute programming and ministry for the church. It is no wonder then that the majority of churches people called “good” are the ones with a robust *hired* staff (and the economic capital to support them). Churches who can offer hefty salaries and packages can afford the best talent in the market, like any other business. Small and under-resourced churches comparatively struggle to attract an increasingly professionalized market of church leaders, who expect full-time salaries. Whereas Black churches historically maintained ministries almost exclusively through their volunteers, most “good” churches in the market have full-time paid staff members to do what volunteers typically do in small and under-resourced churches. Thus Black churches are typically at a disadvantage in the contemporary setting.

### **DISPARATE DISCRETIONARY TIME OF LAY CHURCH LEADERS & VOLUNTEERS**

Churches with significant financial resources not only have hired staff members instead of volunteers but also maintain a wealthier population that often has more discretionary time to volunteer. This compares with other working-middle class communities who are stretched for time and money and have to juggle competing personal, social, and professional commitments.

While I appreciate how some celebrate the significance of lay volunteerism and underscore the deeper sense of purpose it cultivates (Hybels 2014), what is often missing from the conversation are the disparate resources of discretionary time afforded to the wealthy, as compared to most working people. Some of the theories of church volunteerism did not work in my congregation as most of my members are Black, underpaid, single mothers, and working-middle class families. Further, some theories of volunteerism do not account for the reasons why ethnic and racial minorities have historically led churches that shape and cultivate the ongoing spiritual and emotional identities of its community. This points to an underlying tale of disparate realities among volunteer pools. People in my church often come to church for community and relief from the social ills of their week and for encouragement to fight on. With disparate financial pressures and realities at every level, even when controlling for income, and the number of persons working in a household, the experiences and ongoing challenges for racial minorities and working-class persons in America still pales in comparison to the wealthy. This is true for the discretionary time they have for anything, including themselves. Recently I did a church survey of my leaders that substantiated this and found that most people were burnout, restless, and without real Sabbath. I decided to place all ministries on a sabbatical to give our already stretched community a break. I wanted them to come to church, without expectations to do anything except be refilled. Operational struggles are real in churches that have under-resourced populations who work multiple jobs to stay afloat, manage grave-yard shifts, or simply do not share in the affluence of time and wealth resources as others.

Jesus addresses the same disparity with the widow's mite as compared to the large sums given by the rich. Jesus extols her by saying “this poor widow put in more than all the other

contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4). When looking at the tremendous sacrifices of my congregates, I quickly began rejecting most of the mainstream theories of volunteerism. Instead of asking for more, I learned that my already stretched population had given all they had- and in comparison, their sacrifice was actually greater. Instead of taxing myself and our volunteers with the burdens of our operations in comparison to other churches, I instead searched for efficiencies and developed a mantra of “small ask” and “small task”- where we only ask our volunteers to serve one hour per month. We also had to be sensitive to whether that small ask and task philosophy would not work for people, instead encouraging Sabbaths. Additionally, I flood our volunteers with gratitude for giving from their already scarce resources of both time and money. In other words, churches with fewer resources must be careful not to measure or compare the capacity of their operations and volunteers to other “good” churches and ministries, as other underlying factors make account for what appears better.

All churches and churchgoers must be careful not to appeal to the disparaging inequalities and privileges of wealth and volunteerism that often account for the good they see. If money, then, is a significant determinant of how people consider and evaluate what a “good” church is, what are smaller churches with significantly smaller budgets to do? How can these institutions, with limited financial capital, create an experience that connects with people in order to maintain their longevity and stability? Church leaders and church goers should also exercise extreme caution as they rate the operational and organizational goodness of churches, as inequalities also exist among those who have discretionary time to volunteer, implicitly pointing to the ongoing

existence of racial and socioeconomic apartheid in the world (Henry 2018). The same holds true in how people rate church buildings and space.

### **THE PERCEPTION OF A GOOD CHURCH: BIGGER AND “BETTER” BUILDINGS AND SPACE**

Church-goers and church seekers often rate their experience at a church based on the aesthetic of the building and space, which are compliments to the overall atmosphere and church experience. However, the unfortunate reality is that disparities in buildings and space exist and are based on a church’s access to resources. What an organization is able to do with its buildings heavily depends on its access to financial capital, which widely varies from church to church, and race and wealth are significant determinants at play.

### **ACCESS TO CAPITAL FOR “GOOD” BUILDINGS**

Researchers have shown that a congregation’s wealth, real estate, location, affiliation and jurisdiction, and governing structure determines its creditworthiness and its ability to acquire financing from banking institutions (Kuehner-Hebert 2012, Rolfs 2017, Margolies 2019, Zinsmeister 2019). This negatively impacts minorities and financially-stretched small churches, who do not receive the same treatment from lending institutions, which affects their ability to acquire and maintain nice facilities. When controlling for denomination, finances, and other measures of credit-worthiness, black churches were charged more for credit and denied loan modifications, and were three times more likely to be forced into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, as compared with the alternatives and options provided to other churches (Foohey 2017). This again impacts a church’s ability to maintain an attractive physical plant.

While larger and wealthier congregations often have the resources to renovate older buildings and build new ones, making them more attractive to potential members, smaller churches with fewer resources do not have these same luxuries. It is critical to address these disparities when it comes to space because buildings, more often than not, impact people's perception of and desire to be in a church. What people do not realize however is that they are often making a value statement that richer is better. Ironically, while the New Religious Marketplace demands nice, newer, and larger buildings, Jesus was born in a manger (Luke 2:7), had no place to live (Matthew 8:20), and was buried in a borrowed tomb (Matthew 27:60).

A good church in the New Religious Marketplace is perceived as having nice edifices with a well established congregation with substantial economic capital. Yet when people see good church facilities, they are looking at the display of wealth, even if those institutions started small with modest resources. Again, I want to be clear that I am not disparaging larger churches that have seen financial growth over the years, as many (and arguably most) of them started small and grew over time. I have no desire to discount their stewardship and growth, but rather believe The New Religious Marketplace often inequitably and exclusively favors their affluent stature over and above small churches-such that big is good and God, and small is not. I am simply suggesting that financial growth and stature is not an indication of *Godness* or goodness, especially when compared against those who do not share the same privileges. In other words I want to caution against confusing privilege with God and successful, fruitful ministry-as poor, under-resourced congregations in store-fronts and small buildings across the world are also doing powerful ministry that may not be reflected in the building itself. If this were true, what might our

ancestors who worshipped in tabernacles and tents say? They would not fit the bill of having a “good” house of worship according to this new paradigm.

### **STEWARDSHIP OF LIMITED CAPITAL**

The counter narrative for many congregations like my grandfather’s was to take the long road of paying for a church with cash through fundraisers and using the hands of the tradesmen in their congregation to build the churches-- as many churches were excluded from finance options. Over fifty years my grandfather’s denomination slowly grew their own treasury and would eventually start to lend capital to their congregations, who otherwise struggled to receive financing from lending institutions. Many churches that exist today have similar histories that reflect their faithfulness and stewardship over what they had, independent of whether their coffers were large or small. It was the commitment and dedication of the church members to do fundraisers that kept the church doors open in Black churches across the United States (Higginbotham 1994). Kitchens were renovated before the building was touched because it was the chicken and fish dinners sold on Saturdays that allowed churches to remain financially stable. Similarly, during my childhood my grandmother, mother, and aunts sold food and baked goods in order to financially sustain the church. I saw this growing up around a family of preachers who literally built churches with their own hands, making the best of the resources available to them. My grandfather carried bricks in his station wagon to lay the foundations in churches he supported throughout Alabama. In some fifty years later I followed his example when I was selected to pastor a 100-year-old southern transplant church in Massachusetts. Although my challenges were different than his, the process was not without its challenges.

Because I understood the dynamics of the New Religious Marketplace, when I became the pastor of my church I immediately realized that no one would want to walk into our church unless we repaired the building. After I completed the first project on our building I learned about financial resources that were available through the Cambridge Historical Commission to preserve and restore churches. When I first approached the Commission they detailed how the funding could be used. Like virtually all grants, theirs was a matching program that required us to use our own limited capital upfront. They also required all organizations to independently procure a survey, architectural, and structural renderings of the building. Those were tall orders for our already limited budget, so they suggested that we identify members of our church who could provide pro bono services and donate their time as they had seen in other churches they had supported over the years. Unfortunately, we did not have members with those hefty credentials, so I pushed back and asked if they had ever considered that their ask/requirements restricted some churches. To their credit, they changed their position, as they never considered that all churches may not have the same resources. Several years passed after we were successfully awarded the grant and they called me to see if we wanted to use the funds. They were worried that we had lost interest again (as was the case in a grant the church was awarded 20 years earlier), but I explained that it would take some time for us to build capital in order to front-load the expenses and seek reimbursement from the grant.

Additionally, I had the ornery task of finding banks that would actually lend to our small church with a humble budget. The hoops were significant, yet I finally identified a bank that had supported other Black congregations within the Cambridge Black Pastors Alliance. The bank immediately drew our attention to loan options which they provided in partnership with the state



of Massachusetts' Capital Assistance Program (a fund created to help small businesses access lines of credit which they otherwise could not qualify for). These were just efforts to restore our failing building.

I hope this unveils how conversations in the New Religious Marketplace around good church buildings and space have more complicated social and economic implications than what meets the eye. In a recent ministry course that I took with pastors and church leaders I participated in an exercise that was meant to draw parallels to our ministry priorities as reflected or implied in the design of our building and worship space. In the exercise we were told to draw a brief map of our church building, detailing the placement of the pulpit, communion table, baptismal pool, fellowship hall, classrooms, and other items specific to our church practices. The exercise was meant to highlight how our building design reflected our church's ministry priorities. However, I pushed back and argued that many (perhaps most) churches don't have the luxury to choose or design their sanctuary - they just had to use the space that they were given or could afford. The church that I pastor was founded by African-Americans who migrated from the South to New England. They did not have a place to worship, so they purchased an old livery stable, and retrofitted it into a church.

If a good church and ministry is reflected in its real estate, design, and assets, most churches that bear the name of Jesus would not fit the bill. Goodness in scripture is something we can't always see, but resides in our hearts. Goodness and God-ness was not a display of wealth, in fact Jesus said it would be hard for a rich man to enter into God's Kingdom (Matthew 19:23). Goodness and God-ness in scripture is rooted in how we love and care for one another, not in the design of our church building. Instead, we see the pleasure that God takes in our stewardship of

what we have. This was true when there was no building during the tabernacle periods, and when buildings were constructed and destroyed in the 1st and 2nd Temple periods and beyond. Jesus refers to himself as the temple, and later the Apostle Paul would echo that our bodies are temples of the Lord. Most of the early church communities resided in houses where believers met. Wherever they were, the church emerged. In other words, “small” was and still is the norm, which is something we should consider and celebrate as we process the role, viability, and function of small churches in the New Religious Marketplace.

## **SMALL AIN’T SO BAD, AND BIG AIN’T SO GOOD**

### **THE BLACK CHURCH AS A MODEL**

The Black church has always existed outside of the mainstream, and can serve as a model for small churches who have to exist up against the NRM. Black churches were never worried about grandiosity and wealth, they were instead invested in creating solidarity and sanctuary for their community. They enjoyed being set apart because they were already set apart and marginalized in their social, cultural, political, and economic experiences in the world. They therefore developed counter-cultural responses in order to survive- resolving problems through volunteerism and Human capital versus money. Black churches had an unmatched serving culture, grounded by deep faith in the church’s mission, support, and care for the beloved community. There was a big “this is ours” mentality with a deep sense of pride for our own buildings, churches, schools, and networks. I can hear my parents saying: “if we don’t, who will... certainly the world is not going to do it.” This took root in grassroots fundraising, and a hands-in, hand-up, hand-across culture, as compared with the hand-out and hand-down culture in

the NRM. Ministry in the Black church was done from the ground-up. I recall this as a child in Birmingham where our churches and community established their own children & education programs (Ms. Beavers, A.G. Gaston, Camp Birmingham, Cambridge Community Center), HBCU(s). They were interested in a church and community experience that spoke to our needs and plights, with our own music and culture, worship, preaching and teaching styles. They were interested in cultivating faith and solidarity, and preservation of ethnic heritage and history. There was not interest from Black churches to keep up with the market, but rather to be a home for the community. This has broad implications for how small churches should specifically anchor their identity and purpose in the NRM.

### Small Church

We have discussed the shift in the New Religious Marketplace that has defined what a good church looks like as “more” and “bigger.” However, I believe that “small ain’t so bad” - that is, being small has its distinct privileges and advantages that should be considered and celebrated in the process of making disciples of Jesus. While most of my members who have come from larger churches had a tough time adjusting to our small church, I have specifically noticed how they appreciate our close-knit, family-like environment. I asked one of my members to anonymously share talk about their transition from their former larger church to our smaller church:

*When I came to this church I was looking to connect with ministries that I had previously experienced at my last church, which was much larger. I quickly noticed that the church did not have the bandwidth to do those ministries, or maybe felt it was best to focus on the entire church. I don't know. Either way, I was disappointed. Ultimately, I came to grips with this reality by focusing on what they do. Which to me was to focus on the whole body of the church.*

*Worship as one community. Pray for their flock. Fellowship with their flock. Leave no one out. I choose to focus on the fact that I feel welcomed, visible, acknowledged, and loved. I exist in a society that can often make you feel invisible so I cherish the small family environment this church nurtures. I've heard the saying that it's not what people give you but it's how they make you feel that matters and this is true here.*

These thoughts ultimately highlight how small churches have their own distinct qualities, and if they embrace and live out those qualities they can ultimately shift and form people's perception of how small ain't so bad. Having direct access to the pastor, and being in a close-knit community becomes a distinctive part of their Christian experience, formation, and discipleship. In fact, in the massive growth of megachurches, some pastors concluded that their churches were large, with healthy budgets, but were missing the essential functions of ministry that were modeled by Jesus and the Early Christian Church (Chan 2018). Many large-church pastors have therefore responded by creating small groups where discipleship can take place. They discovered that big was not better, but rather small provided the occasion for deep intimate connection, enabling them to really do the work of relationship development and transformation, resulting in better disciples of Jesus Christ. This is true of Jesus, who had 12 disciples very close to Him and three even closer. The goal for Jesus was not to create a church service, but to make disciples. What's more, Jesus was the greatest minister the earth ever saw, but he had no social media presence or marketing plan, robust operational infrastructure, hired staff, nor a building.

Others have argued that some churches fail because they are too big and complex and not simple enough (Rainer 2011). What you actually see even beyond the church is how corporations have learned to perpetuate more personal, intimate, client-specific relationships, and small connections which they believe are more important to create customer loyalty, sales and patronage, and satisfaction (Shulman 2003). While small businesses (and churches alike) often

despair about being small and the need for growth, large corporations are engineering strategies to master smallness by cultivating closer relationships with their customers (Shulman 2003). Examples of this are -- they remember your name, what you specifically like to buy, what you left and missed, and remind you to come back. They've mastered what small organizations like Cheers (where everybody knows your name!) and small church pastors have done for years. They've perfected and skillfully designed a feeling of "small" because they have increasingly realized that small ain't so bad!

My goal is to celebrate the benefits that are naturally ingrained in small churches that will allow them to thrive in the New Religious Marketplace. Small institutions should (a) understand and embrace what makes them distinct and leverage those strengths; (b) focus on the essential and core responsibilities of a church in connection with their capacity; (c) realize and embrace the benefits of a small church; and (d) stay on the wall and remain encouraged.

### **UNDERSTANDING A CHURCH'S UNIQUENESS AND LEVERAGING THOSE STRENGTHS**

Small churches must first focus on and assess what makes their specific congregation unique and leverage those strengths. They often fall victim to trying to do everything like larger congregations. Like small businesses have had to rethink how they could do business, moving from physical retail to online stores, physical restaurants to food trucks, and print to digital, small churches should see the value of smallness and realize efficiencies in their ministry scope. In some sense, small churches must disrupt the New Religious Marketplace by dispelling market expectations and redirecting their focus and the scattered focus of the market on their specific gifts and qualities. In this process, small churches are, in fact, fulfilling their prophetic call to

speak truth to power, market norms, and the status quo--which best positions them to make authentic disciples in the New Religious Marketplace. Small churches should disrupt the New Religious Marketplace and shift the market's focus by delivering their best-- not what the world has determined is best, or another church's best, but their unique best as they impact and serve their specific communities.

### **RESET AND ASSESS**

I believe in order for a small church to successfully assess what makes it unique and distinct, the process often begins with a hard reset or Sabbath. There may be times when a church organization needs to hit a hard reset in order to determine its unique contribution to and brand in the New Religious Marketplace, however difficult this reset might be. This may include the elimination of established ministries, infrastructure, and traditions, which could be met with some resistance.

Small churches should find encouragement through the witness of Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Ezra as they documented how they successfully rebuilt the Temple after it was destroyed in the Second Temple Period. Some of the most compelling conversations that they document detail the psychological agony and struggle that the ancients mustered because they had to start over. The biggest struggles were not from laying brick upon brick, but rather the harsh reality that many did not want to face – they had to start over and rebuild. Scripture tells us that while some were happy, others cried and bemoaned the fact that they had to start afresh (Ezra 3:12). Stopping and starting fresh can be one of the most complex and tragic experiences for us, as it is often the signal of defeat and submission to some, while simply a recognition of the need for new direction

(and re-creation) for others. Learning how not to despair about what we do not have and embrace what we do have is important in stages of recovery. But we are given tremendous testimony from the prophet Zechariah who challenges the people of God to not despise the days of small beginnings (Zechariah 4:10). We are further told that God rejoices over the plumbline in Zerubbabel's hand as they were restarting the rebuilding program, which indicates that starting anew is not so bad.

I have also found the benefits of stopping and restarting to be true in my church. Several years ago, for the first time, I did a Sabbath and pressed pause on all the ministries because we had so many people who were burnt out, including me. I was particularly exhausted from trying to rebuild an organization that was struggling significantly upon my arrival as pastor. After eight building projects and several years of nonstop ministry, I saw that many of our processes and internal programs were not working well, and excellence was being compromised. During this Sabbath, we hit reset and reviewed our processes and implemented new ones. I did this in order to sustain the health of our organization, volunteers, and the ministries themselves, and to sharpen our focus. Initially, it was met with much resistance; people saw it as an insult to take a break and step back. But over time, it was appreciated as people reflected on the fact that we were, in fact, breaking the biblical command of Sabbath. Furthermore, this Sabbath allowed us to reset, recharge, and determine our uniqueness and optimal performance with the resources available to us. I believe that this exercise is critical for small (and big) churches - periodical resets are crucial in order to assess and redefine a church's distinct mission, call, and contribution in the world.

## **DEVELOP YOUR CHURCH'S BRAND**

After you have stopped and assessed your organization, it is critical to begin the development or (re)development of your church's brand. While they may have many items on the menu, people most likely go to McDonald's for the Golden Arches (its French fries) and Burger King for a Whopper. One of the greatest challenges that most organizations face, however, is their confusion about what they provide, which leads to burnout as they attempt to become jacks of all trades and masters of none. Many churches have 100 ministries run by 10 people with 2 people showing up for each event. Over time, this reality leads to diminishing returns and exhaustion because there is too much going on, especially when managed by a faithful few. In other words, it's not small or defined enough. The smaller the scope, the greater the focus and likely, the largest return on effort and investment.

As small churches explore what makes them distinct, they must be clear about what they are good at, develop it, and master it like no one else on Earth. A part of brand development is simply figuring out what you are good at and embracing your own creative distinction and growth edge. While "big talk" dominates conversation in the New Religious Marketplace, specificity, customization, and uniqueness is what most small business owners attribute their growth and success to, ultimately leveraging their small, localized, and personal advantage (Palmer 2018).

All churches, but small ones in particular, must therefore pursue relevant ministry within their means. Through surveys and visitors feedback, we found that most people joined our church because they felt at home, and enjoyed the intimacy of prayer, preaching and teaching in our church. Over the years, we have tried to hone those areas by creating more opportunities for



fellowship and outings, more special services for prayer, and establishing a sermon-talk back component in our worship service and Bible study. Small churches must be true to themselves and hone their specific gifts, understanding that their unique niche is their market identity and gives them their own specific edge in the New Religious Marketplace. Small churches and organizations would do well to embrace the words of Dr. King:

*[Do your] job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better.” If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, “Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.” -- Martin Luther King on Dec. 11 1961 to the Fourth Constitutional Convention of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)*

Jesus teaches us this in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), cautioning the person with the least not to bury his gifts, but rather do their best with it. He exclaims that if you are faithful over a few things, I will make you a ruler of many. Yet Jesus is not appealing to the sinful motivation to always want more; rather, He emphatically tells us to be faithful over whatever resources we have.

While developing your brand is critical, it is also important to proliferate and establish brand clarity in your community. This includes building consensus among your leaders and church about your church’s niche, as all ministries and activities should flow from that. Mastering

a clear sense of a church's identity and brand can be difficult for several reasons. In my case, I found it difficult when you are in an older congregation because of its established traditions and historic reputation. In those cases, the congregation and broader community may wrestle with changing its perception of the church. In newer ministries newness often means that your constituency may not have the greatest literacy of your church's narrative function or brand. If the church's brand is unclear in those cases people can easily misunderstand the mission and function of the church, which can provide barriers for engagement.

In all cases churches have to oversimplify so that their growing communities can quickly understand and attach to the brand and ministry. This is often easier and quicker in smaller churches, as it's easier to turn a small boat around than a ship. Either way, the quicker that church communities can simplify and clarify their work, the quicker congregants can become a working extension of it. Otherwise they can easily work against the brand, identity, and mission. Therefore, establishing the brand on the front end and simplifying it can create an accessible learning curve for people to ultimately attach to and develop the church's brand.

### **FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIAL AND CORE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

People often come to churches shopping for "services" and wanting it all -- the best preacher, the best choir, the best children's ministry, etc. So many pastors and leaders today exhaust energies trying to create the best array of services without truly mastering how to make disciples. The religious marketplace has been filled with devotionals, thematic preaching, commentaries, written books, small groups, children and youth groups, not to mention tons of curricula options spanning from new members to special topics. Rather than focusing on the core

mission of making disciples of Christ, often small organizations, leaders, and pastors in particular despair and stress themselves out trying to grow their ministry market and explore all the potential things they can do. In the New Religious Marketplace where people want an array of services, modern day pastors must filter this and determine whether their church ministries have made room to focus on truly making authentic disciples of Jesus. We often get consumed by the idea that more options and alternatives are better than a focused and narrow approach. However, I want to offer that a church cannot be distracted by this and must first master its capacity to provide the most essential Christian services that were modeled by Jesus, which were teaching and prayer. Small churches should always evaluate whether our core values and motivations are borne out of our biblical witness or our appeal to the market. Are we making disciples, or creating a customer base? Are we facilitating relationships or transactions?

Early in ministry I learned that my small church (and I) could only do a limited amount of things very well. My congregation in a highly transient area often comes with challenges as many different people from different backgrounds come through our doors. These persons often come with expectations based on their past experiences and what they expect given the well resourced, industry-leading institutions, and companies in the surrounding Cambridge area. Yet, we are just a small local church. I believed that it was our duty to provide the essential services described by Jesus, and other services *within our capacity*. I therefore firmly established a consistent preaching, teaching (for all ages), prayer, hospitality, and worship culture. While many would criticize that these categories may not meet the five-fold standard, or other models, I would argue that each church has to determine what essential ministries they can offer based on the gifts, talents, and makeup of their church and leaders. Many of the areas I list now were not established

in my first year of ministry, yet as our ministry grew and I helped to identify and cultivate leaders, our capacity has increased. However, this all comes down to what you can do with the people you have to lead and do it. All of the core ministries in my church started with a sacrificial commitment from a faithful few.

### **UNDERSTAND THE CAPACITY OF YOUR VOLUNTEERS AND CONGREGATION**

In addition to focusing on a church's core responsibility of making disciples or students of Jesus Christ, a small church must have a firm sense of the capacity (i.e., respective gifts, talents, and time) of their volunteers and leaders. One of the quickest ways to burnout is when a church tries to live beyond its human capacity, and sometimes this is done in order to appeal to a wider demand at our own peril. When a church desires to grow and reach a broader audience, its evangelism and outreach plan must take into account the capacity of its leaders to do the work of discipling. Given time limitations and work demands, many pastors and churches are experiencing significant declines in volunteerism, which in turn has an impact on the availability of staff and team training, and the expectations that we as pastors place on leaders to do the work in our churches.

Throughout my pastorate, I have been concerned with and implemented strategies that would support the "faithful few" in my congregation. At my church, I have pursued a number of strategies to address the overstretching of a limited team. To begin, my community would not even be in existence if it were not for the efforts of the "faithful few" before I arrived. It has been critical for me to understand that if my small congregation was going to do ministry at a high level, in the areas we were gifted in, I would have to be attuned to the needs of those who were doing the heavy-lifting in terms of volunteerism and financial support - my leadership and

ministry would have to *adapt*. In 2017, I conducted a series of surveys which in part determined their capacity for discretionary time. What I found was that many people did not have much discretionary time to serve and volunteer at the church. Furthermore, my congregation became overwhelmingly commuter-based as opposed to residential over the last few decades, and the majority of my members have to drive to church, rather than walk down the street. This placed an even greater strain on their time and energies. People wanted to serve; that much was clear. However, their professional, familial, and social responsibilities were constantly being weighed against their church engagement.

As a result of these realities, I had to be thoughtful about how to engage my already busy and stretched-for-time membership. I understood that I could not expect my volunteers to meet multiple times a week. Therefore, I moved the majority of weekly church events to one night per week. Bible study and the worship team rehearsal both took place on the same night. Instead of having multiple weekends filled with church events, I decided to designate one weekend per month where our men and women could gather for food, study, and fellowship. We reconciled expectations with the realities of our membership in order to find a happy medium that would allow us to exercise our particular ministry gifts with excellence.

Small churches cannot create more burdens for their members but rather understand the capacity of their volunteers and adjust accordingly because a small church's viability is most often supported by the willingness and availability of their members. Not everybody has the same availability; in fact, persons at every point of the financial spectrum have increasingly become more stretched for time. The wealthy, however, have addressed this issue of time by giving more money to their organizations. But low-income communities are hit from every side - members of

these communities have neither the discretionary time nor income to support church organizations. Therefore, leaders in these institutions must be open to adaptation to determine what model and structure works best for them and their faithful few.

Small churches in particular should be concerned with the “ask” of their members in regards to time and finances. The economic and social disparities facing small churches indicate that we must be especially thoughtful and considerate of what we request from those who make up these congregations. Instead of asking people to serve several times a week, consider once a month. Instead of asking people to give a thousand dollars, start with one. Churches and organizations would do well to consider this “small ask, small task” philosophy. In doing so, these institutions demonstrate their attentiveness to the needs of their population and ability to adapt to the changing realities of the day.

### **EMBRACE SMALL BUILDINGS**

In recent years many large churches have begun to despair about having large buildings. First, with large declines in churches across the country large churches often struggle to fill the pews. Large churches who have experienced decline often struggle to have an identity beyond the building. The steeple, pictures in the vestibule, and fifty-first row become enemies to their ability to down-size and adapt to their new realities. Pastors and leaders across denominations have shared these struggles with me as they have had to mediate church mergers, closures, and down-sizing in recent years. These issues are often further exacerbated by the cost of maintaining large, and mostly older buildings (in New England).

My colleagues in larger churches who have struggled with these ongoing realities have told me in concert: small ain't so bad. The small building that my church had was a blessing, and

allowed for us to experience quick wins as capital improvements were felt in a large and immediate way given our small size. Our small church was less costly and cumbersome to restore and renovate as compared with larger churches, which respectively allowed us to do more with less. Our small sanctuary has also allowed us to avoid feeling like we are in an empty church, as it feels comfortable with a large or smaller crowd. In the age of church decline, small church buildings are especially valuable.

### **BE MORE A MORE DISCIPLINED FINANCIAL STEWARD**

Smaller churches most often have smaller budgets and therefore have to practice greater stewardship, as every dollar counts and cannot afford to be wasted. This kind of pressure causes small church leaders to create disciplines that may not be important to larger organizations, who have more leeway and room for exposure. Everything you do as a small church organization has to be considered with greater detail and focus. While larger churches may have greater bandwidth and capital at their disposal, and more room for error, a small budget is already at the floor and has nowhere else to go. Therefore small church leaders are required to be more deliberate about the way they steward resources as they have to make a little go a long way. Similarly, small church leaders are required to be adept at using prayerful caution as minor mistakes can tank a small operation. I also believe that having small resources naturally increases your prayer life and walking with God, as there are often no security blankets, except our reservoirs of faith and trust in God to secure the impossible. Small resources also help small church leaders to have sympathy and sensitivity to struggle, and the school of hard knocks- which is life's and God's greatest teacher.

## **GREATER OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE, GROW, AND MAKE A TANGIBLE IMPACT**

Beyond the ability to have closer relationships, small churches provide opportunities to serve and make an impact, in large ways. When I first began field education during my Master of Divinity program my mentor advised me to go and serve in a small local church. He actually directed me to the church I now pastor, suggesting that a smaller church would give me more opportunities to serve and grow as compared to a fully staffed larger church. He told me about the politics of preaching and leading when you have 50 ministers to rotate, as compared to a few. From the beginning I was able to start serving and cultivating my ministry gifts. I was afforded rare time to work next to a senior pastor and receive constant mentoring, coaching, and support that is unlikely to occur with pastors in larger churches who have less bandwidth.

That has been a hallmark of my church throughout the years, where young people from across the country are able to come in and quickly feel at home, and also serve and contribute to the life of our community. Scores of seminary students, teachers, lawyers, ministers, artists, and community organizers have found ripe opportunities to accomplish quick, tangible wins within our community. They could also receive up-close and personal support, guidance, and relationships that would have taken much longer in a larger church.

Small is also an advantage when it comes to our “ask”, as I have also observed that people are more likely to give in a small rather than large organization because of their perception of impact - their dollar and contributions are understood to go further because of the smaller size and scope of the institution. An example of this is our church’s building project where instead of tearing the whole building down as they had considered before, I decided to renovate the building one section at a time over eight years and asked the church for small commitments to support this.



People were comforted by seeing the immediate impact of their financial contributions on our small building. In other words, small ain't so bad.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **STAY ON THE WALL AND REMAIN ENCOURAGED**

It can be hard to ignore and not despair over the fact that disparities often drive different realities of growth and struggle for churches. Remaining encouraged in the New Religious Marketplace can be especially hard for small churches when big ministry is on display, unless you embrace the idea that small ain't so bad. Small institutions are often working from a significant disadvantage when it comes to economic and social resources. Small organizations must be encouraged, knowing that the small is good, valuable, and significant to God. I draw inspiration from the words of Nehemiah, who in the tenth chapter sends messengers to proclaim that he cannot come down from the wall because he was doing a “great work.” Nehemiah’s encouragement to “stay on the wall” should be a rallying cry for all organizations, but small ones in particular, because it serves as a reminder that they are doing good work that must continue. Many small churches miss opportunities to celebrate their work because their leaders and congregations compare themselves to other churches, or focus on the great gulf of need, rather than what has already been accomplished. What I accomplished in my church in nine years, some wealthier institutions could have completed in one. I had to learn how to circumnavigate comparing the great moves of God happening with my peers and other churches, to the tremendous, yet lengthy time it took for us to restore and beautify our small three-story stable-church. I had to wrestle with comparing the quick strides of others to the laborious steps I

had to take, with additional weights. While the accomplishments and strides of other churches were constantly displayed, I had to discipline my focus and perspective on the great work God was doing in my church.

A brief review of history shows that the earliest Christian communities were marked by their significant perseverance, patience, and sacrifice. They had problems that only faith could resolve, not social status or wealth. Everything that they did was by faith, and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). No one could access the miracle of the cross without eyes of faith. The leaders we see in scripture are prophets who influenced culture from below. In the New Religious Marketplace small churches should be prophetic and remind people that the work of the kingdom cannot be quantified by wealth, buildings, media and influence, or ministry operations, but is reflected in our saving faith. Small churches should remember that *small ain't so bad*, and *big ain't so good*. Further, in the scale-up culture in the NRM where pastors and churches tend to measure themselves by numbers, small churches should remember the words of Jesus: “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them(Matthew 18:20).”

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