

The Small Church at Large: Thinking Local in a Global Context

Robin J Trebilcock

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SMALL CHURCHES WITH A FUTURE

Financial pressures, growing bureaucratic complexity, the apparent cultural triumph of secularism, cultural fragmentation, and many other factors, are making life for the small church difficult. Take, for example, the fragmentation of culture. The variety of lifestyles and beliefs available and demanded in our culture require a church to possess multiple access points between it and society. Moreover, these access points cannot merely be leading to the one-style-fits-all inner-sanctum, but must reflect a church that is diverse, open and flexible down to its very 'DNA'. Most single minister small churches lack the resources to do this.

Many think the answer to this predicament of the small church is for it to close or be pulled into the orbit of a larger church. However, the bear hug of the large church too easily chokes rather than enhances the untapped possibilities inherent within the small church. Financially saved (in most cases temporarily) by the big church, the little church becomes free to blithely soldier on with little or no serious grappling with the *possibilities* of genuine mission in the new landscape. Eventually convinced of their own irrelevance, or, delivered an ultimatum by the larger church (or denominational manager), the little church closes with hardly a whimper. Oh, of course, we have a thanksgiving service for all those faithful years of service. But then it is gone, sold and the money used where it can be 'better' spent! *This attitude, I am sorry to say, is as rife among the membership of the little traditional church, as it is among the hierarchs and denominational managers.*

Providentially, there is a body of practical knowledge born out of hard experience that can help the small church, membership and stipended minister alike, envision a different future. Robin Trebilcock's little book, *The Small Church at Large: Thinking Local in a Global Context* is an excellent contribution to this practical knowledge base.

Robin Trebilcock is a Uniting Church minister, until recently serving the parish of Prospect Road in Adelaide, South Australia. The book describes this parish's metamorphosis from five small, separate traditional congregations into four centres of mission. These five parishes were brave enough to contract each of their independent traditional congregations into a single worshipping congregation meeting in one of the buildings. And then, over time, this traditional form of church was supplemented by other new ways of connecting to the world around. Five independent congregations have now become four centres of mission (spanning the five building plants) reaching out to the people around them without re-duplicating ministry.

Two favourite terms of the author are 'open' and 'at large'. Both are the antidotes to the usual reaction of the small, traditional church to the changing world. Instead of defensiveness, a small church needs to be open and flexible, trying to find the questions, and then not presenting the alleged universal answer that looks suspiciously identical no matter to whom it is directed. Such a church is not only receptive, but actively looking, listening, and visible in its environment. This attitudinal change is not just for the church as a whole, but for every individual, group and, yes, most especially the pastor.

Indeed, the new mission frontier requires the pastor to be 'at large'. For Robin, his office is not located in the bowels of one of the buildings, but the local coffee shops. In this 'office' people see him, he experiences the world, and unhelpful aspects of the link between the minister and the church property can be broken. Moreover, by being 'at large' the minister has the opportunity to experience life in that space where church and world meet.

Chapter 1, entitled 'The Small Church and Big Possibilities' gets us straight into what Prospect Road has tried to achieve, and some of the attitudinal barriers they face(d), both within themselves and from their denominational controllers. He writes a great little section on the deep love traditional churches have with rationalization. Entitled, 'Countering the Drive for Administrative Simplification' (pp. 33-34) it helped me identify a residual, uncritical fondness I was harbouring for rationalization. He says that the desire to rationalize properties and ministries into monoliths of varying sizes is a fossil from the previous modernist age. Unfortunately, it is a living fossil continually dug up and paraded as the answer by the new managerial class of denominational leaders. For example, have you ever thought that (at least part of) the answer to the woes of the Church is for some of the small churches in established areas be closed, and the proceeds of the sale be used to plant churches in the newer outer suburbs? Not so, says Robin Trebilcock, and makes a convincing case for the obvious alternative. (This alternative is the subject of the whole book, really.) Simply, it is not that our money is poorly placed, but that *we are ineffective*, and rationalization admits it.

The rest of Chapter 1 is devoted to explaining the connection between chaos theory and how to structure multiple ministries. If too few 'units' are placed together the result is boredom; too many and chaos results. Somewhere in-between is the edge of chaos where creativity and innovation abound. The problem is that it is difficult for the church planner to judge increments of complexity in the context of multiple ministries.

At Prospect Rd they decided that four distinct outreach communities (encompassing the five centres) was the right number. In coming to a decision about these four communities of mission, they used three methods of 'zoning'. These methods were demography, psycho-social analysis and reflection upon the character of the place and its people. (pp. 35-41; see also pp. 66-71.) This is worth a read for anyone wandering how to get a handle on the people that comprise their area of ministry.

Chapter 2 provides a good summary of many of the changes that have occurred in Western society that have hurt the 'old model' of Church. No matter how strong a church is internally, it is in a weak position in our post-Christendom, postmodern world. And this is one of the well made points in this chapter. At the beginning of the modern era the church was part of, and responded to, the changes occurring. What we might, pejoratively at times, call 'the old model' is a product of the church in the past fitting mission and its needs to the changing world. So, in the past, grand schemes, administered hierarchically or, in its latest manifestation, through a line-of-management worked. But this modernist project is now a misfit with Western culture. Robin warns us that the key to this changed world is not hostility, but to join in the remaking of Western culture. He makes good sense here: if post-modernism is a reaction against the oppressive aspects of modernism, then it is suicide for us to confuse modernist attitudes and structures for the gospel itself.

In this chapter Robin also translates Paulo Freire's 'conscientization' of the oppressed into the context of the Church's oppression by the scientific rationalism of our culture. As conscientization brings the concepts and language of freedom to the oppressed, so new ways of engagement are discovered. (pp. 51ff) This is a good insight and worth pondering (and acting upon).

In Chapter 3 you will find a good description of Robin's postmodern approach to mission, especially 'Spirit on Offer' (p. 64) When a church has relinquished the modernist accoutrements of authority, uniformity of belief and grand systems, it is free to offer 'Spirit', without strings attached. We are not to resile from this unique Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus, but a more generic approach of 'Spirit' allows people (and the church) to move and explore spirituality in a way appropriate to the postmodern sensibility. Many of a more conservative bent may find this uncomfortable. But the chapter has many practical examples of how this is carried out at Prospect Rd in the four mission communities. (pp. 64-79.) If you are skeptical about this approach, then go straight to the last paragraph on p. 78, finishing on p. 79. It is a good justification of his underlying methodology.

Chapter 4, 'Network Relationships' is an essential chapter to make the whole thing work. Prospect Rd, and the vision of the small church that Robin is espousing, relies on a network approach. It is antithetical to the predominant hierarchical or line-management approach. He has some theory to give as well as practical examples and advice for the reader who would like to begin implementing such an approach. Key here is the need to break the addiction to control and the reintroduction of uncertainty into the life of the church. A willingness to allow uncertainty brings with it all sorts of benefits in terms of interaction and innovation. Also helpful is his distinction (from Tom Bandy) between prescriptive thinking and proscriptive thinking. (p. 88)

If you need advice on how to manage a network church in a line-management/control denomination, this chapter will aid you. (p. 89) More practical examples of how Prospect Rd implements all this, including growing leaders, can also be found on pp. 90-107. Good stuff.

There are plenty of gems in this book that I can't cover in this review. Often some relatively small point in the text makes a larger impression on the reader. For example, when speaking of the grand system type tendency of modernist churches, he notes that top-down management is the usual practice. The answer is not just to democratize the production of the grand-plan (p. 44), because in his experience it still remains a top-down driven process from construction to implementation. Too true, and suggests that the kind of openness we are looking for is not fulfilled in an occasional consultative plebiscite!

Overall, perhaps, some might criticize Robin Trebilcock for producing another 'how-to' church management book. While he does rely on the works of some of the gurus (in particular Tom Bandy and Bill Easum), he takes their work and puts flesh on it for the small church in Australia. This is a practical book that relies on the sharp insight of the author gained through decades of ministry and the reading and reflecting he has done over the years. In this *The Small Church at Large: Thinking Local in a Global Context* reminds me of an Alban Institute publication. Of course, he could have written more. There is an ecclesiology embedded in this work that could do with explication. But that explication is available elsewhere

Robin Trebilcock says that his 'call to ministry is to make the Church relevant to its mission field.' (p. 43) This book easily fulfills that criterion, and then some.

Written for small-church leaders, especially in rural and pent-urban settings, *The Small Church at Large* blends creative storytelling with practical principles. This book is about "thriving" small churches as they confront the changes of our times and engage the people in their communities who were born after 1965 (Gen-Xers, Millennials) in worship and mission. The real competition comes from within the small church itself. It is the smallness of its vision, the smallness of its inclusivity, and the smallness of its heart. Robin John Trebilcock proves that neither the lack nor the abundance of resources will be decisive for the future of the small church. Imagination, sensitivity, leadership, and sheer undiluted faithfulness will win out every time (more). all members. "Think Globally, Act Locally" is an effective approach in terms of ensuring the long-term growth of a company in the global arena. However, its practical application is associated with a range of challenges that need to be addressed affectively and efficiently. Generally, the difficulties associated with the need for companies to adapt to local differences can be categorised into three groups: cultural misunderstanding, incompetent management, and changing needs. This is a challenging task to complete, but if effectively conducted can assist in achieving market leadership for the company in a global market arena. Currently, the majority of businesses operate in a way that they try to identify customer needs and produce products and services in order to satisfy those needs.