Having served in our conference for many years, I am on a perennial search for resources that support and encourage the small congregations that make up much of our constituency. There are many excellent resources out there, many of them tend to be of the how-to or program idea genre. Gratefully, I found Lewis Parks newest book, *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church*, published by Abingdon Press this year to be a welcome change. How-to books may provide ideas that generate energy that will create momentum to initiate a turnaround, but this is rare. Dr. Parks does the theological work necessary to sustain service and life in the small church.

Parks opens the conversation by inviting us into a period of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness of all we balance as pastors of small churches; whether it be the large church on the other side of town or the reality that 30 elderly folks now occupy, and try to sustain, a physical plant designed for 200 plus congregants. If the boiler goes, the church goes. Then what? What is the cabinet thinking? How do we compare and compete? And does it really matter if we try?

As I read this book with the Greenbrier District Lead Team, I found myself remembering not only whose I am but who I am called to be amid all the pressures we sift through and balance. With a pastor’s heart, this author encourages us to drop the baggage of doubt and perception, and to hold that hour on Sunday morning as sacred as we attend to the community we are called to serve and join them in their primary purpose. They gather regularly to worship God.

We are reminded that the power of that Spirit is present to every congregation, regardless of size or location. The Spirit makes true worship possible, and provides the gathered congregation with every gift it needs. The Spirit also desires to move the congregation to a place where it can continue to grow in love and grace.

When looking at small congregations, Parks has pushed aside the typical measures of growth and actively searches for what he describes as "the soul of the congregation." Rather than looking superficially, he invites extensive exploration of the gathered community's expression of worship together. It is here that we can see what is most valued, and here is where the servant leader and the church begin to find meaning and value in themselves and each other.

While Dr. Parks understands role of the small church pastor in times of crisis: offering alternative narratives that are drawn from scripture to provide a different viewpoint, offering the comfort of familiar ritual and sacrament and simply providing presence, he also lifts out what he defines as two strengths of the that are particularly evident in the life of a smaller church that that admittedly made me cringe at first. He identifies that the small church can easily serve as a surrogate family fulfilling different needs during different times of transition in life. He also raises up the intimacy found, the immediate rallying around when the church or a church member faces a time of crisis

When talking about ordering the life of a small church, Parks says this:

"The hero in the heroic work of ordering the life of the small church is whoever steps forward to help the congregation name and face its challenges. There are pastors "ordained to order," meaning their calling and equipping have prepared them to inspire and pace necessary work. These pastors serving in a small church know that people must own the work, must view it in the end as their act of faithful discipleship." (page 76)

To this end he coins the phrase dynamic equilibrium, and says that life church is both "theological and biological. The small church exists and endures because it is gathered, visited, and gifted by the Spirit to be and do church. The small church exists and endures because it is a strong Spirit – animated organism, a whole with independent parts pulling in the same direction, a small living system, that balances its internal energies and successfully negotiates external encounters." (page 79) He continues to provide a list of what fruitful dynamic equilibrium looks like. You might want to add your own markers and share them with the author to add to this list.

When moving on becomes necessary, Dr. Parks invites congregations to appreciate their history alongside biblical history and then to act with intention given the current situation and information available. He emphasizes the healthy necessity of the congregation to claim decisions, stating that a church in dynamic equilibrium chooses the people of God every time.

Perhaps most importantly, Lewis Parks encourages the healthy small church to accept who they are rather than to settle for being a sick larger church. Healthy small churches can invite spontaneously and authentically and have something to give that may not be received in another setting.

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