



# Most Americans attend a small church

Putting an end to pulpit envy

Not too long ago our presbytery meeting was held at a cathedral-like church with thick stone, intricate stained glass and a grand, high pulpit. As I climbed the steps to the pulpit, I swear the air got thinner. When I got to the top and behind the mic, I felt like I was commanding a starship. There was a smooth wooden shelf encircling the area, like an expansive console surrounding me, but without flashing computer screens. I felt like I could pilot the church straight to heaven. As I looked down upon my colleagues something inside me felt strange. Then I realized what it was. I had pulpit envy.

Everything that pulpit represented flashed through my mind — a big church, with possibly a big endowment. In my momentary reverie, I thought about all the members who would surely fill boards and committees, do outreach and take on meaningful mission projects in the community and around the world.

It's not just pastors who suffer from pulpit envy. Many members look at other churches and think that surely things are going better in that bigger church down the road. We think about the choirs bigger than our congregations, the computer-run lighting systems and the hip programming — all of which can make us feel like we are worshiping in Grandma's faded living room by comparison. And truth be told, some of our furniture was donated from Grandma's living room.

Up there in my temporary command center, I remembered the small church I serve. The pulpit I use each Sunday is mostly packed with audio equipment. Every so often during worship I disappear to bend down and fiddle with the audio levels if we have a special singer or if the mic has suddenly stopped working. Instead of a calm and powerful commander standing at the helm of a big church, I'm more like the busy conductor waving a stick at a small musical ensemble that is sometimes missing a few instruments.

Of course, the reality is that big churches and small churches each have their share of challenges to face. My pulpit envy is purely a function of my own mind. If I am honest, the problem is that too often I think of small churches as failures. I know I'm not alone in this. Many congregations have corporate memories of bursting sanctuaries and expanded education centers as cultural

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Christianity thrived in the '50s and '60s.

We often think that if we were truly sharing the gospel, our small churches would turn into the big churches we covet. And while it seems like big churches are everywhere, the reality is that on any given Sunday more than 60 percent of people worshipping in the United States are sitting in a church with fewer than 100 people. Most of those people are in churches with fewer than 50.

My perspective on small churches started to change at a synod gathering last year. We were supposed to brainstorm how a congregation of 15 might live as resurrection people. The ideas were plentiful: Sell the building and donate money. Worship in homes. Grow the congregation. Create a new worshipping community. The underlying assumption most of us had was that 15 was just not enough people for real ministry. Then someone said something that stopped the conversation.

“Why do we think we need a hundred people to make a difference? Jesus changed the world with just 12.”

Things began to shift in my mind and my ministry that day.

Descending the steps of the high pulpit, I discovered something else. Even though I've thought about leading a big church, being up there was not for me. That's not judgment on the people who have big-church leadership skills. Our big churches are vital to our ministry together.

But we small churches have an important place, too. We are not failed big churches. Like all congregations, we should be judged on our willingness to follow God's mission in our time and place. Using that criterion, the size of a pulpit doesn't matter. Faithfulness does.

*Sue Washburn is the pastor of Reunion Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. She wrote this in a coffee shop next to people talking about their mega-church challenges.*