

Global Missions in Smaller Church Contexts

Four very different churches tell their stories

The four churches we highlight in this issue couldn't be more different—in age, location, membership, and style. But all have found ways to engage powerfully in missions, far beyond their size. While they could find excuses to focus on their own needs, all are stretching their people to personally own the task of reaching the world.

Zion Christian Church

Pittsburgh, PA

From Pastor Dan Cramer



A few years ago, we started noticing Nepali-Bhutanese people moving into our community. But at that point, we didn't know who they were. Then one day, a friend invited me to join him in visiting an immigrant's home. I was shocked to discover that three extended families were living together and

they had almost no furniture. Their tremendous material needs as well as spiritual needs were very eye opening for me. I left that house that day knowing that our small congregation had to make a difference in these people's lives.

As a result, our Bridge of Hope ministry was born. These immigrants need help on almost every level, and by befriending and serving them, we earn the opportunity to introduce them to Jesus. We have provided close to 500 people with furniture and have spent thousands of dollars at the Indian and Nepali grocery stores as we take these new friends for much-needed food.

The attitudes of our congregation have changed as they are introduced to Bhutanese whose lives are being impacted. They begin to see them as real people. For example, one



Sunday we introduced a young woman whose husband had committed suicide because he had medical bills he couldn't pay. This young widow needed surgery. We decided to take an offering to pay the rent for this family until she could recover and work again. It was the largest special offering we have ever taken!

Has everyone in our church caught the vision? No, but a growing core of people have! Multiple people are involved every week. For instance, a businessperson volunteers to teach immigrants how to write a job resume. And a professional dance teacher in our church leads Bhutanese children in creating and performing worship dances. Since dance is such a huge part of their culture, we also plan evenings when we invite our immigrant friends to

join the congregation in a meal and dance celebration. The Christian words of the music are in their language, and we believe it touches hearts.

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Because we are a small church and understaffed, I wear a lot of hats—I pastor but I also cut the grass, clean the church, shovel the snow, etc. But this ministry to immigrants is important enough to me that I create the time to build friendships with these folks. It is relatively easy for me to

take a small amount of time to visit a home for an hour without detracting from other ministry demands. If I am going to



continually impart this vision to our congregation, I need to have personal contact

myself, and I try to always take someone else with me.

This fall several of us made a trip to Nepal to visit some of the Bhutanese refugees still living there. Actually this is another way of building bridges to the immigrants here in our community because they see that we care enough to visit their homeland. When we live like they are important to us, spend money like they are important, and pray like they are important—it builds relationships!

There are about 110 people in our congregation when everyone is there, so a visitor can't walk in without everyone knowing

they are new. Our people do a good job of reaching out to newcomers, especially the Bhutanese. We understand it is something God wants us to do.

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Six Principles for Mobilizing Smaller Congregations

- **Relationships.** People usually choose a smaller church because they are looking for personal connection. Build missions around powerful relationships.
- **Scale.** A smaller project that the church can fully “own” is often most appealing.
- **Hands-on.** Members of smaller congregations are do-ers. Look for opportunities for high engagement.
- **Uniqueness.** Small churches may need help to recognize their unique context and resources. Identify their DNA and use it.
- **Unity.** Smaller churches love to do things together. Look for opportunities to engage everyone from toddlers to seniors.
- **Network.** When several smaller churches work together, they may have more potential impact than a megachurch. Develop collaboration among several congregations of similar size.

Almost from the beginning, the church supported missionaries. Presently we support 12. Three of them we have commissioned and sent out from our church. The amount we give (\$400/quarter for each worker) is minimal compared to their overall needs, but we love and care for them. We used to read missionary letters in our services; now we send out the letters via email. But in Sunday services we make sure that we mention specific prayer requests and pray for them.

Beecher Island Sunday School

Wray, CO

From member Jacque Ekberg



While we have a board of elders, all major decisions are made by the congregation.

Beecher Island doesn't have a resident pastor. That's why we call ourselves a “Sunday school,”



although we function as a church.

Over the years various people have come to preach on a regular basis. Our church is located 16 miles south of the town of Wray, so almost

everyone comes quite a distance for services. Our average attendance is 70 including a number of young families.

We decided to trust the Lord and keep what we needed for January but divide the remainder among our missionaries.

As a result, our people are really involved in doing the ministry of the church. At our annual year-end planning meeting, we talk about everything—new ideas, what isn't working so well, how we could do things better. Years ago at one of those meetings, we saw that the Lord was meeting our financial needs and we had money left over at the end of the year. So we decided to trust the Lord and keep what we needed for January but divide the remainder among our missionaries. We have

done the same thing every year since. So each missionary gets around \$1,500 in an additional, year-end gift. It keeps our hearts focused on missions!

Grace Church of Alexandria

Alexandria, VA

From Lead Pastor Jonathan Matias



Here at Grace Church we think of ourselves as a family, with approximately 90 attending Sunday services. The five missionary units we support are an integral part of our family—but we consider these workers particularly deserving of family care since they live in challenging environments.

Caring grew out of our own experience as a new church plant seven years ago. We started out with a lot of help and encouragement from churches in the area that said they were praying for us. So we just turned those lessons around and applied them to our missionaries. We may not have as much funding to give as a larger church, but we can love and pray! That translates into frequent Skype calls where we listen and interact.

I pray with our missionaries over Skype. We talk about discouragements, temptations, victories, their kids, etc. Others in our church Skype, send packages, etc. too. I am so encouraged when I hear that our folks are actively connecting.

Building productive relationships with our missionaries is an intentional priority that starts early. When we first meet new missionaries, we ask them to stay as long as they can with us—usually three days to a week or two. “Meld your hearts with our church family’s hearts,” we suggest, “So when you leave, we can care for you as a part of our family.”

We book their time full with connections to individuals and small groups. That way when they are far away, they have these connections with people in our church. We find that our people are open to visit workers on the field because they got to know them while they were here. It also gives us the context to talk into their lives and to ask them to talk into ours.

We don’t have a team to care for our missionaries, but each missionary unit has an advocate who updates our small groups and is our contact with that missionary. Since I’m the

only staff person, my schedule often feels overloaded and I need to push responsibility down to these advocates.

Grace occasionally patches one of our missionary families into our service through Skype. I will dialog with them so that the congregation sees how I talk to missionaries. This modeling shows them that missionaries are real people who have normal conversations that they could have with them too. It also demonstrates how to use careful vocabulary when talking to someone in a security-sensitive location.

I wish agencies would reach out to churches like ours. We would love to get their perspective on how we could serve our missionary. Sometimes I feel like I am walking in the dark. It would be great to know one person in the agency of each of our missionaries.

From Dave G, Missionary with Grace Church:

At the time that my wife and I were first raising support, Grace Church was just launching. The church was not able to support us, but they built great relationships. They communicated awareness and concern about what we were doing. Then when they were able, Grace became financial supporters too.

When we suddenly lost our sending church, it was a no-brainer to ask Grace to fill the gap. In this crisis time, Jonathan and the elders met with us over Skype. They asked good questions. When we returned to the States, they met with us and allowed us to “offload” in a healthy way. They provided godly counsel, prayed

for us, and gave us a steady stream of “have you thought about...” questions.

Even though we currently live three hours away, we have wonderful relationships with numerous people at Grace. We love to find excuses to go to Alexandria and be with our sending church!



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Chapel of the Lake

Lake St. Louis, MO

Harley Marshall, Administrator

Donald Smith, Missions Leader



Don (l) and Harley (r)

Our church was founded 40 years ago and early on, missions became part of our DNA. Our congregation of approximately 300 has a long history of giving a significant portion of our budget to world missions.

Almost 10 years ago, our pastor was contacted about an opportunity to become partners with a ministry that matched North American churches with national church planters. These workers are known as “frontliners” because they serve on the frontlines among unreached people groups in Southeast Asia where Western missionaries can’t go. In 2006 our pastor went to the field and was introduced first-hand to this ministry. He came home with the conviction that this was something we should do. We adopted one of these workers and the people group he and his family are reaching.



Each year since then, we have tried to send two leaders from our church to the annual frontliners retreat. The

frontliner field partners all come to a “safe” location for several days of renewal sponsored by all of us Western partner churches. It’s a wonderful time of encouraging our workers but also being challenged and encouraged ourselves by what God is doing. To date, 10-12 of our people have been there, gotten to know “our” frontliners personally, and have come back to be advocates for what is happening there.

Our congregation understands that they are directly involved in this difficult, exciting, cutting-edge ministry. And we take our role very seriously! Even as a smaller church, we are directly involved even though we can’t contact this people group ourselves. We know that if we aren’t praying, our frontliners aren’t getting prayed for. If we don’t go to the

annual retreat and meet with them, they will have no one there to encourage them. We can provide only a small portion of the financial needs for other North American missionaries we support, but our frontliners’ monetary needs are less, which gives us the opportunity to be their sole Western supporters (they also receive support from believers in their own country).

So we feel a very significant amount of ownership. Our people get excited when we share from the pulpit or in a newsletter article that things are happening among “our” people. We are thrilled because there are now upwards of 30-35 believers on this island where there was just one!

In many ways, our challenges aren’t significantly different

from those of larger churches. We need to get our people to see and understand the needs and make meeting them a priority in the midst of hectic

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lives. We wrestle with communicating the challenge without laying on a guilt trip or making it a burden.

Our missions committee works in concert with our pastor, the elders, and our deacons, but this takes intentionality, even in a smaller congregation. None of us can operate solo. Communication is key, and we have to keep working at it. We can’t sit back and rely on what we did years ago. Rather, we want to see where the Lord is working now and how He wants us to fit into it.



A small church can have a big impact in world mission!

We can be collaborators in the task. We just need to identify what we can offer, what we can do. If we are willing to be used by the Lord, we can have a significant role. But we have to reject the stereotype that we are “just a small church.”

Jim Goshert
Cornerstone Christian Fellowship, Lebanon, PA

Discussion Starters for Churches

1. Some smaller churches tend to like tradition and consistency. This can be an advantage if your congregation wants to commit to sticking with a task over the long haul. Or it can be a disadvantage if you are ignoring new global opportunities or refusing to adopt fresh approaches that engage younger people. Are these good/bad traits true of you? What are the implications?
2. What do you consider your greatest limitation as a smaller church? How could you turn it into an advantage?
3. Has God brought people from around the world to live in your community? A smaller church may be a more comfortable environment for these guests than a larger one. How could you capitalize on your friendly context to reach out to these newcomers?
4. What could you do together with other churches that you can't do alone? Don't assume sister congregations are too busy with their own agenda. Invite them to consider working together.

Discussion Starters for Mission Agencies

1. It can be tempting to assume all smaller churches are alike. As you consider the differences illustrated in these stories and your own experience, how could you develop or hone some helpful categories of smaller churches?
2. As you consider the six principles for mobilizing smaller congregations, which ones can you exploit in ways that benefit your ministry and smaller churches?
3. The senior pastor figures significantly in a number of these stories. How could your organization better connect with these very busy leaders? What resources could you supply that particularly serve lead pastors?
4. How could your organization respond to the pastor who wishes that his congregation had a personal connection with someone in his missionaries' sending agencies? Could you invite better dialog with the leaders of smaller churches?

Learn More!

Watch this: [Glenside Bible Church](#) is a smaller congregation that caught a big vision for Central Asia. You will be encouraged and challenged by the story of what God has done in and through this church.

Read our previous *Postings*, [Global Missions in New Church Starts](#), for ideas about incorporating missions into the DNA of a new church from day 1.

Appreciate the impact of the not-so-big congregation. Our *Worth Considering...* blog, "[Smaller Churches Prevail](#)" is a tribute to those small-in-size but big-in-heart.

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