

## Small Challenges, Bigger Blessings

Growing up in a small church in Converse, Texas brought a unique perspective and appreciation for the Body of Christ to my earliest years of church life. What I remember most is not the decades-old flannel figures used in my classes, or even the small sanctuary with cracked plastic "stained glass" windows. I remember relationships with the people who knew and loved me.

Today, I see from an adult's perspective how difficult ministry in a small church can be, bringing unique challenges that must be evaluated and overcome. Let's look a little closer at the blessings and challenges of ministry to children in a small church.

1. **Blessing:** Kids form tight bonds and lasting friendships! Since there is no place to hide while attending a smaller church, there are fewer folks there who have just come to "church shop." Generally speaking, this means families are here to stay, at least for a little while. Fewer families means a congregation can really become family more quickly!

**...and Challenge:** Sometimes it's easy for children (and adults, too) to think that every church is like our church, and those who aren't are wrong! Kids need opportunities to be exposed to those who are "different." Some solutions to this challenge could be to encourage interaction with families from other denominations, those who have different worship styles and churches that incorporate other cultures into their worship. While some things about Christianity are non-negotiable, encourage your kids to be receptive to others who don't do things just exactly the way you do.

2. **Blessing:** You can be a "quick change" artist! With fewer children and a smaller team of teachers, changes can be implemented fairly quickly and your program can flex to meet your current needs. If you suddenly have changes in your volunteer pool, finances, or number of students, you can tailor your program to meet the needs of your children at that precise moment in time.

**...and Challenge:** The programming resources of a small church are limited. In a world where bigger is often seen as better, resist the urge to compare yourself to the larger churches around you. A good philosophy for small church ministry is to have fewer programs, but to do them all with a level of excellence that reflects well on our heavenly Father. Rick Cromey, in his book *Children's Ministry Guide for Smaller Churches*, refers often to the idea that "quality produces quantity." Also, if a family within your congregation has a very specific need that your church is simply not equipped to handle, don't be afraid or too prideful to refer them to a ministry that can better meet their need.

3. **Blessing:** You know how to stretch your pennies! As a children's worker in a small church, you know how to make the most of the resources you have. A small budget can inspire creativity like few things can! Your children can learn from this frugality. Also there will be less temptation for your kids to join your ministry just to receive prizes and perks.

**...and Challenge:** First impressions are very important! The solution: know when to say enough is enough. Although reusing curriculum and stretching your resources is a must, be careful of the impression that is being made on your children, their parents, and first time visitors. If your teaching visuals are shabby or outdated, some kids may deduce that your teaching is no longer relevant either. Remember, too, that cleanliness does not need to cost a lot of money. Whether your room has all the latest gadgets or its carpet is worn and full of holes, neatness speaks volumes. Ask God to help you know how to make your facilities and teaching materials reflect your love for the children in your classes.

4. **Blessing:** No one's a stranger! You can literally greet everyone by name on any given Sunday, and not just the kids, but each of their parents and every sibling, too! You can take advantage of having fewer students to keep up with by giving special attention that would be near to impossible at larger churches. Attend the birth day parties and baseball games of kids in your ministry (just be careful to divide your time evenly)!

**...and Challenge:** Don't be naive about your comfortable surroundings. You must not let the family atmosphere of your congregation lull you into thinking that there is no need for a volunteer screening process. Perform background checks on all volunteers on a regular basis. With a little explanation as to why policies must be put into practice, your volunteers will not only grow to tolerate the little bit of inconvenience, but also appreciate your efforts to protect the church from child predators or nasty law suits.

While ministry in a small church does bring challenges, remember that the grass is not necessarily greener in the yard of the mega church! There are no fewer difficulties in a church with a larger facility or less restrictive budget. The problems are just different. Look forward to the time when your students can reflect back on their childhood church experience with fond memories of family. Remember the apostle Paul's wise words from Philippians 4:11 and 13: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances... I can do everything through him who gives me strength."*

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