

**Small Membership Church Dream Team
Report- January 9, 2012**

Life in the small membership church is the celebration of all that God has done in our lives

Small membership churches have a rich history and some would even say they are the “backbone” of the Nebraska/Kansas region. Many of the small membership churches, in the soon to be Nebraska/Kansas Area are in communities, which have experienced school closings or consolidation, businesses shutting down or moving to other communities, and shrinking and changing populations. In the past few months many communities received word that their post offices will be closed, which to some feels like one more sign that the church will be next. Now the Nebraska and Kansas Areas are consolidating from two to one Area and maybe even from three conferences to one conference.

Many small membership churches wonder if conference consolidation is a sign of what will happen in the future. Some are asking questions such as: “Will our church be closed?” “Does anyone care about small membership churches?” “Will we be next?” For some becoming one conference is a sign, once again, that small membership churches have no control over their destiny and are doomed to failure.

Actually, a new hope is born that the future Nebraska/Kansas Area or Great Plains Conference can bring to small membership churches. If church members, pastors, districts and conferences are intentional about working together, to grow spiritually and reach out to community, the new conference can and will be a vehicle for renewal in the lives of church members, the community they serve, the conference and our world.

To become a vehicle for growth the new conference will need to build programs that are designed to help churches and lay persons to grow. And church members need to recommit to living in and growing in God. Small membership churches will not survive if they do business as usual. A surprising 83.5% of UMC churches in Nebraska and Kansas are SMCs! Therefore, the Conference(s) will be stronger when small membership churches are vital, focusing and celebrating God’s goodness.

First, for the new conference and churches to be effective a new connection between the conference and churches needs to be **BUILT ON A CULTURE OF CONNECTEDNESS, COLLABORATION, AND VITALITY**. The connection needs to be bi-dimensional like the cross. It has a vertical (top-down) dimension and a horizontal peer dimension.

Vertical (top down):

1. All good relationships, all growth, and all of life begins with a spiritual relationship between Jesus and each Christian. The Annual Conference needs to be spiritual not just procedural. When lay persons come to Annual Conference they come expecting to be fed and take revived spirits home.
2. The Annual Conference staff who are assigned to assist Small Membership Churches need to develop ways for the church and Conference to communicate, that is accessible, and helps churches share with one other and the Conference.

Horizontal (peer)

1. We are not alone. We are the body of Christ! Every church no matter how small or large is important. When one suffers we all suffer. When one succeeds we all succeed. Rather than see the other churches as competition or the conference as the “giver of paperwork and taxation” we need to work together for Christ.
2. Together we need to help each other discover ways to bring the next generation of lay leaders to our churches and to the Annual Conference.

3. We build trust by listening and respecting each other.

Vertical /Horizontal within the Local Church

1. Rural churches are relational and need to build connectedness i.e., relationship with people inside and outside of their worshipping community.
2. Relationships with people are crucial in the SMC since they help the local church build support for mission and ministry (apportionments) and to be engaged in the transformative mission of the church.
3. SMC Relationally based ministry will need to grow, with the help of technology, so that members are in relationship not just with people 15 miles down the road but with brothers and sisters in Christ halfway around the world.

Second, collaboration needs to be emphasized at all levels of the church. Pastors, patriarchal/ matriarchal congregational leaders and conference staff have acted alone and taken a “Lone Ranger” approach to ministry. Some have protected their programs like a child protecting their sand box. At all levels of the new conference collaboration needs to be encouraged:

1. “Bottom-up” cooperation is essential where we practice inclusiveness not just at the communion table but at the conference table as well. We seek and respect the voices of lay, pastors, district superintendents, conference staff and bishop.
2. We realize that there are many resources and models available to strengthen small membership churches. No one program can work in every church. We need many programs, but especially programs centered on small membership churches and rural ministry settings suited to those settings, rather than literature and continuing education which centers on mega-churches and urban settings.
3. Small membership churches must recognize that a licensed local pastor or Certified Lay Minister may have fewer hours to spend on the charge each week than an Elder appointed full-time. This recognition needs to come with an increased participation by the congregation in the life of the local church.

Third, Vitality begins with spiritually healthy members and pastors who:

1. Are equipped for a ministry of vision relevant to their mission field and gifts.
2. Have appropriate and effective tools to measure and assess their vitality, and
3. Encouraged and provided opportunities to gather in small clusters, districts and conference for encouragement, spiritual strengthening, and storytelling.
4. We can network with other churches who have experienced our challenges and come through. We can celebrate those ministries that are uniquely accomplished in small membership church settings. These gatherings provide that sense of connectedness that is often lacking in the small membership church. Leadership training events could bring similar sized churches together with answers that fit them. While leadership programs offered at large churches are great and very effective, often the answers they offer are unwieldy in congregations that are smaller than the church staff at the teaching church.
5. We can network with other churches who have experienced our challenges and come through. We can celebrate those ministries that are uniquely accomplished in small membership church settings. These gatherings provide that sense of connectedness that is often lacking in the small membership church. Leadership training events could bring similar sized churches together with answers that fit them. While leadership programs offered at large churches are great and very effective, often the answers they offer are unwieldy in congregations that are smaller than the church staff at the teaching church.

4. A network with other churches who have experienced the same challenges and victories in ministries that are unique to small membership church settings. These gatherings provide that sense of connectedness that is often lacking in the small membership church.
5. Leadership training events to bring similar sized churches together with answers that fit them.

For churches and lay persons to be effective the Conference needs to provide training that builds leaders. We suggest the following to lead by:

1. Clergy educational opportunities to learn the culture of small membership churches and rural churches before appointment time.
2. Develop a program for rural and small membership churches. Leaders of SMC's must have training in understanding the context that they serve and live. For example, rural churches may have cycles of attendance and giving based on crop schedules and livestock production. The rural church pastor does not panic when attendance is down when the hay is ready to cut or when giving is down just before the livestock sale.
3. Rural Ministry is not a stepping stone or a default because there is no other place to be appointed/assigned but a specialty ministry and should be treated as such by the cabinet(s), and board(s) of ordained ministry.
4. Develop reporting methods that are specifically designed for small membership churches and help lay and pastoral leadership accurately discern God's call for the SMC in their community.
5. Develop diversity of population training for pastors and lay leadership. Often the generationally poor and the immigrant populations are misunderstood, neglected and sometimes ignored outright. SMCs/rural churches need a pathway for continuing education to love, learn, and grow from these populations, which populate most of our rural parishes.

Second, churches and pastors of SMC's need to be trained in hospitality and outreach that fits their context for ministry.

1. Since, in communities where our SMC's are located, the church has the potential of being the center of community life, churches need to focus on how they lead and touch the lives in their community. Training programs on leadership are crucial for pastoral and lay leadership around leadership.
2. Hospitality needs to be genuine both inside and outside the church walls; programs which would enable churches to move beyond attraction to mission needs.

Third, Annual Conference Workshop Sessions that would move beyond business and worship, be in each quadrant of our conference(s), and specific to SMC's settings.

1. The conference needs to continue developing Webinars yet SMCs are relational and need settings where they learn, work and grow with person to person and face to face interaction.
2. Add a lay and clergy workshop sessions to annual conference that help persons grow in one area important to congregational life. Multiple sessions can run simultaneously so that SMC's, middle size, and large churches each have a session that is relevant to their ministry setting.

We the Small Membership Dream Team of Nebraska and Kansas East and West Conferences dream of small membership churches empowered to serve, ready to give, and eager to love their neighbor.

Small membership churches engaged in outreach, genuinely interested in the lives of the people they serve, authentically offering Christ through relationship building.

We dream of a small membership church with pastoral leaders who love the small membership church and choose to serve there as a specialized ministry, whether those pastoral leaders be Elders, Licensed

Local Pastors, or Certified Lay Ministers, knowing that when churches are served by pastoral leaders who love them, they are freed to do the work God has uniquely called and qualified them to do.

We dream of small membership churches coming together to do ministries larger and more impactful than they might do alone.

We dream of small membership churches reminded of their history and heritage, encouraged by that faithfulness to reach for a future with hope.

To make the dreams a reality, it is important to intentionally design a new conference which helps strengthen churches of all sizes to become equipped with members, pastors, churches, who will in turn empower us as an Annual Conference. From the beginning a culture of connecting and collaborating so that we become a vital body of Christ is essential. Intentionally strengthening churches through conference programs designed with and for small membership churches to build lay and pastoral leaders is essential. Leaders, when trained, are able to move beyond the walls reaching out with the hospitality of Christ.