

Chapter One

See for Yourself: Reimagining Ministry Success

In September 1540, Spanish conquistador Garcia López de Cárdenas and a handful of his comrades happened upon something no other European had ever seen before: the Grand Canyon. It's difficult to imagine what they must have felt. López didn't keep a journal or record his experience in a travel log. We only know that he hurried back from the edge of that deep chasm as soon as he saw it, gripped with “awe that was almost painful to behold.”

Novelist Walker Percy believed that López was not only the first European to see the Canyon. He was nearly the last to see it as it truly is, the last one to see it for himself. This is because the explorer—tired and thirsty after a twenty-day march across the Colorado plateau—stumbled upon the gorge

with no expectations. He was just trudging along, and there it was.

As for the rest of us, our experience of the Grand Canyon is determined by our expectations. Popular culture has immortalized the iconic road trip out West, which invariably includes a stop by the great gorge (think *National Lampoon's Vacation*). Even if we've never seen it ourselves, we've seen enough movies, postcards, textbook photos, and television specials that we have a pretty good idea what it looks like.

As a result, all of us after López come anticipating “the authentic Grand Canyon experience” as it is defined by the experts—the filmmakers, postcard photographers, and textbook authors. The way we rate our encounter is based, in large part, on how well it conforms to the expectations these experts create. Percy puts it this way:

If it looks just like the postcard, [the sightseer] is pleased; he might even say, “Why, it is every bit as beautiful as a picture postcard!” He feels he has not been cheated. But if it does not conform, if the colors are somber, he will not be able to see it directly; he will only be conscious of the disparity between what it is and what it is supposed to be.

What is true of the Grand Canyon, strangely enough, is also true of churches. Many ministers and churchgoers have surrendered their judgment about what constitutes “the authentic church experience” to a small group of experts. These experts write books, speak at conferences, and typically lead large and influential congregations. Because of their success, we imagine them to be great Christian pioneers who are part of something we have never seen—the “real” church experience. Over time, the experts have done for church what

postcards and PBS specials have done for the Grand Canyon: They've made it difficult for us to appreciate our own experience because it doesn't measure up to theirs. We have lost the ability to see and judge our success for ourselves. All we can see is the disparity between what our churches *are* and what they are "supposed" to be.

Ambitions and Revisions

I began my ministry career at the tender age of twenty (it seemed like a good idea at the time). When I accepted my first post as pastor, I was entirely seduced by the experts' description of ministry success. No doubt you've heard the story before. There are endless variations in the particulars, but the arc goes something like this: At some point in your life you sense a clear call from God to enter the ministry. It makes a better story if this happens after years of success in a lucrative secular career or a period of profound and sinful rebellion. After a time of preparation—whether in seminary or through a careful perusal of church planting materials—you take a position in a small church. Over the next several years, your ministry grows. You see people reconcile with God, lives are changed, and you feel confident you are squarely within God's will. You've found your calling. Either your church plant grows rapidly or you move from church to church—usually (and fortunately) to increasingly larger, more vibrant congregations. Soon your peers recognize your success and a publisher asks you to write a book about your story. You share it at conferences. You have arrived.

I didn't have the dramatic conversion story, but I was confident in my heart of hearts that this story would someday

be mine. I came by the fantasy honestly. After all, I grew up in a congregation that exemplified it. It was small when we joined, but by the time I left for college, our youth group was larger than most churches.

So when I took my first pastorate in a small church in the middle of nowhere, I had a big vision for that rural congregation of fifteen or so. I assumed it needed to grow exponentially, as my home church had. And I assumed it needed everything that made that happen at my home church—midweek programs, professional musicians, a dynamic youth ministry. Never mind that the church didn't have enough members to run a single program, any money, or any youth. I was the expert, after all (or I'd read their books, at least). It was fortunate for them I came when I did. I was God's man, I thought, to lead Anchor Baptist Church to the "real" church experience.

But something happened to me there that I hadn't expected. First, the congregation helped me recognize that the small church is fully equipped to carry out the mission of God in the world. They didn't need me to put them on course. They didn't need to be more staffed or better resourced in order to effectively disciple their current members and make a significant impact on the surrounding community. Everything the church needed it had been given by God. I began to recognize potential and strengths where the experts had trained me to see limitations and liabilities. In fact, I began to believe that the smaller church is actually uniquely equipped to meet the particular ministry challenges of the twenty-first century.

Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit began to impress upon me the profound significance of another story, another way to tell the

narrative of God's work in the world. If you're like me, this story probably sounds a little more like your own.

Again, the details vary, but the arc is essentially the same: You feel the same sense of calling and take the time to make the same preparations. After listening to the experts—reading their books and attending their conferences—you apply the principles they identify as the keys to their success. In your ministry, too, lives are changed; people are reconciled to God. Yet success seems always just beyond your reach. No matter what you do, your ministry doesn't grow. And no one validates your faithfulness with their attention. No one ever asks you to speak about how you grew your congregation from 75 to 120 in just seventeen years. As a result, you live with a sense of disappointment. You may doubt your calling and wonder whether you've ranged outside of God's will, because you know well the story the experts have written and have been unable to make it your own.

The overwhelming majority of pastors are living this second story, the narrative of obscurity. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, there are 177,000 churches in America with fewer than 100 weekly worshipers and another 105,000 churches that see between 100 and 500 in attendance each week. On the other hand, there are only 19,000 churches—or 6 percent of the total—with more than 500 attendees. That means that if there were 100 churches in your town, 94 of them would have 500 or fewer attendees, and only six would have more than 500. Mega-churches (regular attendance over 2,000) make up less than one half of one percent of churches in America. The narrative of success may be the one people write books about, but it is not the typical one. We have allowed the ministry experience of 6 percent of

pastors to become the standard by which the remaining 94 percent of us judge ourselves.

In my role as an editor for *Leadership* journal, I've talked with pastors from across the denominational spectrum. Everywhere I go, I hear pastors beginning to question the experts. Though their stories are not often told, I have seen small churches from Chicago to Los Angeles making an enormous impact for the kingdom of God, precisely because they have rejected the advice of the experts. They, too, have begun to see potential where the experts have trained them to see liabilities. Even some large-church pastors are abandoning the predominant metrics of success for new ways of thinking about the work of the church. We'll hear many of these stories in the ensuing pages of this book.

But first we need to deconstruct some of the prevailing assumptions about church ministry success.

Bigger, Better, and the Kingdom of God

While I was writing this chapter, I attended a large pastor's conference on the West Coast. For two days, I worshiped with over 3,000 other men and women who are deeply committed to Christ's work through the local church. At its best, this sort of gathering is sublime. There is something deeply moving about the experience of joining in one voice with a massive crowd of fellow worshipers. The combined energy is empowering and infectious. Theologically, such an experience in a Christian context serves as a foretaste of eternity, when all of earth and heaven will join in the praises of God.

This experience reminded me of what draws us irresistibly to large-church ministry. We love being part of something

larger than ourselves. We all want our ministries to matter. When Christ returns, each of us wants to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The father of modern missions, William Carey, articulated the desire of every Christian’s heart when he challenged his peers to “expect great things *from* God; attempt great things *for* God.” And earthly creatures that we are, the surest evidence we have of the significance of our ministries is numeric growth. When our numbers swell, we feel confident that we have invested our talents wisely. When they shrink, we are inclined to believe we need to redouble our efforts. Ultimately, our desire for the measurable results of success is motivated by faithfulness to God’s mission and our calling.

But there is a danger in our desire to do big things for God, for our pursuit of success dovetails with a powerful American temptation: the appeal of celebrity. These days, obscurity is the worst kind of failure. When we do something significant, we expect to be rewarded with popularity. It would be easy to blame Hollywood or YouTube for this. But the instinct is as old as America itself. And more to the point, the nation’s first celebrity was a preacher. As early as the 1700s, evangelist George Whitefield was already keeping careful (if inflated) count of the crowds that flocked to hear his preaching. The larger the crowds, the more successful he deemed the effort. Whitefield’s popularity has left an indelible mark on our self-awareness as pastors.

More recently, Henri Nouwen said it this way: “Stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our society, are not at all alien to the church. There too the dominant image is that of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone.”¹ What this means is that we want our

ministries to matter, sure. But we also want ourselves to matter. By current standards, celebrity is a sure sign of success. And everyone knows that celebrity is hard to come by when the small church is your platform.

The real danger of the appeal of success, though, is that we are tempted to superimpose our own expectations onto the Scriptures. When this happens, we tell the story of the New Testament church as if it followed that familiar path from obscurity to success. When we do this, we assume the Bible affirms our preoccupation with size.

A popular large-church pastor recently said at a conference: “If numbers are not important, then why does the word *numbers* come up so often in Scripture?”² On the surface, that seems like a fair question. After all, there appears to be a link in Scripture, particularly in the book of Acts, between the faithfulness of the church and its growth in size. Consider these passages: “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers” (Acts 9:31). “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:5). These passages appear to establish a clear pattern. When the church is faithful, the Spirit works and the church grows.

The Scriptures say: “About three thousand were added to their number that day” when Peter preached (Acts 2:41). Reading backward, it’s easy to imagine that what began that day was the first mega-church—Jerusalem Community Fellowship. If we take a closer look at the first chapters of Acts, however, we find that it wasn’t a large, central congregation that was born.

The three thousand who became believers after Peter's sermon were from all over the known world and were in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Luke tells us that in the crowd that gathered that day there were "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; [and] visitors from Rome" (Acts 2:9–10). These new believers may have met together for a season, but most of them likely returned home when the festival ended, taking the gospel with them all around the Mediterranean.

Moreover, whatever Christians remained in Jerusalem after Pentecost were dispersed by persecution shortly thereafter. Acts 8:1 says that all the believers except for the apostles "were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

These insights should adjust our mental image of the size and success of the early church. The three thousand that responded to Peter's message were dispersed over an area twice the size of the state of Texas and separated by the Mediterranean Sea. Pentecost may have been the first mass revival in history, but it did not create the first mega-church. Instead, Acts 2 records the birth of many small—even micro—congregations. The rest of Acts repeats this theme. Acts 9 tells us that it was not a single church that grew in numbers, but "the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria." These small congregations didn't meet in a single building. They met in homes, synagogues, and public spaces. In the passages where Scripture records the increase of numbers, it is usually testifying to the growth of the church universal, not a single congregation.

All sincere pastors and church leaders want to see the

body of Christ expand. After all, Jesus' final commandment on earth was a call to spread his gospel to our neighbors and to the ends of the earth. But we have to realize that we can be faithful to Christ's Great Commission without centralizing worship to the point that every disciple within a two-hour radius is meeting in the same coliseum-sized building every week.

The apostolic church, those scattered small and fervent congregations, spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire in a matter of a few centuries. Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates that at the end of the first century there may have been only twenty-five thousand Christians in the entire known world. By the fourth century, before the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity, there may have been as many as 20 million. This growth occurred through the combined efforts of small churches scattered abroad.

The congregations that made up the early church didn't have the impressive presence many ministries have today through television, radio, and the Internet. They didn't have campuses and facilities and programs. They didn't have educated clergy. God used the combined faithfulness and strength of dozens of under-resourced, poorly staffed, badly programmed, and unprofessional small churches to change the world forever. All they had was the gospel of Christ and the Holy Spirit. That was plenty to expand the kingdom of God across the entire known world. That is plenty still today.

In fact, instead of illustrating the dominant narrative of success, the Bible testifies to the narrative most pastors experience—the narrative of obscurity. Sometimes faithfulness to God's work results in the sudden shrinking of a group

of followers. People left Jesus in droves when his teaching struck too near the bone. In John 6, just after Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water, he tells his disciples, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Nobody had any idea what he was talking about; they were confused and offended. “This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?” (v. 60 NLT). Jesus’ hard words had devastating consequences for his ministry: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (v. 66).

From our perspective post-Easter, it can be difficult to remember that Jesus’ ministry, by all worldly standards, was a profound and extraordinary failure. In the moments as he drew his final breaths, he was utterly alone. At one time, he had an impressive following. Everyone knew his name. He attracted crowds wherever he went. But the nearer he drew to the conclusion of his calling, the deeper he slipped into obscurity.

What may be worse for us is that Jesus promises a similar fate for his disciples—and that includes you and me. “All men will hate you because of me,” he says in Matthew 10:22. And in Matthew 24:9, “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” That message does not sell many books.

I don’t mean to be overly dramatic. My point is simply this: Our dominant narrative of success is not supported by the story of the New Testament church. Scripture makes it hard to claim congregation size as a foolproof mark of faithfulness. No doubt all of us can think of large churches that we suspect are large because they have compromised the gospel to draw a crowd. Conversely, we can think of other churches

that have grown exponentially precisely because of their faithful preaching of the gospel. And for every small church that fails to grow despite its commitment to outreach and disciple making, there is another that continues to shrink because it is petty, mean, and uninterested in the mission of God. Until we stop measuring our success in terms of numerical size and growth, we may be unable to accurately analyze the faithfulness of our ministry. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 3:7, the church leader's job is to plant and water, but the increase of the crop is up to God.

New Sight for Sore Eyes

What is at stake here is not simply an academic definition of ministry success or failure. At its core, how we imagine success in the church directly reflects our assumptions about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After all, an important part of following Jesus is learning to see the truth of things behind appearances. In Christ, the foolish things of the world confound the wise; in Christ the powerless supplant the powerful; in Christ, the eternal purposes of God were fulfilled in the death of the Messiah. If our ministries are to reflect the values of Jesus, we should be skeptical when we are more “successful” than Jesus was.

Of all Jesus' parables, the one that may be most valuable for disciplining our understanding of ministry success is the story of the mustard seed.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” Jesus explains, “which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds

of the air come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:31–32). The obscure, the small, the insufficient—such are the means God uses to bring about his kingdom. These are words of life for the small church pastor and any other Christian longing to see the results of his or her obedience. Though at first and on the surface the work of God appears insignificant and inconsequential, it mysteriously yields a harvest of overabundance.

In fact, it appears that what God delights in most are the tiny efforts that yield results that only he can take the credit for. Christ’s starting lineup was a band of fearful, unqualified disciples. Today, with all of creation at his disposal, he chooses to mediate his message of good news through a community he calls the church. That church—your church and my church such as it is—is God’s mustard seed.

Please do not misunderstand me: I don’t mean to say that God is not delighted by large churches or that their ministries are somehow less faithful than those of smaller churches. But in larger churches, ministry success is easier to see because it shows up in ways we know how to measure. I only mean that the parable of the mustard seed should convince us that we can be part of a mighty work of God even when the results of our labor are not readily measurable and impressive. God is not limited by our resources or qualifications.

Embracing the Vision

When we forget the principle of the mustard seed, we risk forcing our own vision of the church, or the prescribed vision of experts, onto our congregation. In our efforts to live the narrative of success, we view the small church not as God’s mustard seed but as an obstacle to be overcome. We then rely

on our vision to bring about the success we desire. We do this at our peril.

Disturbed over the gap between the church in Acts and the German church in the late 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together* to explain genuine Christian community. In the first section of the book, the person who comes under the fiercest attack is the pastor Bonhoeffer calls the visionary, the person who has “a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and [tries] to realize it.” Bonhoeffer has strong words for this visionary, for the person we might call the “expert” in Christian community:

The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. . . . So he becomes first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself (27–28).

This visionary could be the pastor or member of a church of any size. The defensive and testy small church pastor who wants to see his mini congregation become mega is every much the visionary a large church pastor might be. Similarly, the desire to stay small is just as dangerous as the ambition to grow large. “Every human wish dream,” Bonhoeffer says, “that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive.”

With Bonhoeffer's words ringing in our ears, our challenge is to learn to see the church as it is. The rest of this book will explore the inherent strengths and strategic value of the smaller church. Perhaps, surprisingly, it is not only small-church pastors who have begun to recognize these strengths. Some large-church pastors are beginning to realize that small churches are actually better equipped than their larger counterparts for meeting today's ministry challenges. So as many small churches are straining to become large, a few megachurches are learning to channel the small-church vibe.

It's ironic, if you think about it. Larger churches are spending their considerable financial and personnel resources to recreate the small-church experience. Meanwhile, smaller churches are expending extraordinary energy and resources, burning through clergy and volunteers alike, in an effort to get big. We mustn't let our preoccupation with size cloud the perception of reality that these larger churches are awakening to: the small church is a strategic organism with unique gifts for carrying out God's mission on earth. Instead of trying to imitate large-church ministry, small churches would do well to recognize and capitalize on their own inherent and strategic strengths.

By *strategic*, I don't mean that the exponential numeric growth of an individual congregation is the goal. I simply mean that the small church is uniquely equipped to fulfill the Great Commission. It was grassroots, small congregation ministries that brought Methodists and Baptists from relative obscurity in the early 1800s to dominance as America's largest denominations by the end of the same century. Today, it is small communities, typically of Pentecostal Christians, that are spreading the gospel like wildfire through the global

South. This book assumes that a given local church is committed, as these movements were and are, to making disciples of its current members and to be actively involved in the mission of outreach and evangelism in its community. I hope the examples in this book will help pastors and members of small churches recognize that to participate in great things for the kingdom they do not need great resources, impressive budgets, and expansive campuses and facilities. All the necessary ingredients are in your church right now—for the congregation that has eyes to see.

Of course, there is a challenge inherent in this claim. Embracing small-church ministry may mean facing criticism from colleagues or family members who wish you would move on to a more “successful” ministry. It is difficult to remain content about your mustard seed when birds are landing in another church’s branches. Neither am I suggesting that every small church is healthy and effective simply because it’s small. It may take real work to capitalize on the strengths of your small church. But the important first step is to recognize that being small is not a liability—it can be a strategic advantage.

Walker Percy used his illustration about the Grand Canyon to describe the role of the educator. The teacher’s job is to help people see for themselves—to take the experts’ input with a grain of salt and really engage the world afresh. Again, his insights prove helpful for us. The single greatest problem with small churches is perception. Low attendance, small budgets, and limited staff are not, in and of themselves, problematic. What is problematic are the insecurities and defensiveness

that result when we fail to live up to expectations of success established by a handful of churches.

As a dear friend and mentor of mine likes to say, you can do two things with expectations. You can meet them. Or you can change them. I say we change them. To do that, pastors of smaller churches must help their people learn to see for themselves. Or more precisely, to see the world as Jesus sees it. And that means the pastor must help his people value the mustard seed and view the church as if they were the first people ever to lay eyes on it, to put aside unreasonable expectations, cast their seeds, and trust God for the harvest.

Questions for Reflection for Pastors or Leadership Teams

1. Do you consider yourself and your ministry successful? Why or why not?
2. How do you measure ministry success in your current context? Where do you get the criteria by which you measure success?
3. How closely related are your self-worth and your ministry success? If your church were to stay small forever, how would you feel about yourself as a pastor/leader and as a person?