

“Small Church, BIG Challenge”

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***What do you do when only two kids show up on Sunday, and they're 4 & 12?
Start by thinking S.M.A.L.L.***

Janice hurried through the building checking each of the three classrooms. She'd invested several hours already that week ensuring everything would be ready for the kids. Janice loved the kids of First Church of the Valley; she'd overseen the children's ministry there for almost two years now, and thoroughly enjoyed her part-time position. She had to admit, though, that sometimes she was frustrated, not knowing how many kids might show up, or if they'd be preschoolers or preteens. She was often preoccupied by questions about her small children's ministry: *How do I prepare for the unknown? How do I make ministry relevant for just a few kids with such varied ages? And even more important: Is our ministry really effective with this unique group of kids?*

Thousands of children's ministry leaders face these same questions every week. They work incredibly hard to minister effectively to the kids who arrive at their doors. They face the challenging prospect of not knowing how many kids might show up (two or 25?), along with the even bigger challenge of meeting kids' needs – when the kids are all over the age spectrum. So how do you keep a small church ministry effective and relevant?

You think S.M.A.L.L!

S: Start With a Plan

To create impact – in any size children's ministry – you must begin with a plan. Plan how you'll effectively reach kids in your children's ministry. Recruit for the classes you'll offer – even if those classes are occasionally empty – based on your average weekly attendance (track attendance for three months to get a close average). Do the necessary volunteer screening and training to prepare volunteers. Prepare teaching materials, including curriculum and supplies. Prepare your space and be ready.

Note: Being ready doesn't mean having a healthy stack of word puzzles and coloring pages ready for kids. It means being prepared with a full lesson plan that maximizes every moment your volunteers have with kids.

Big Things About “Small”

First, let's explore what it means to be “small.” Church culture today tends to attach a negative stigma to the idea of being small. After all, if you're “small,” you must not be doing something right...you must not be as effective...you must not be as attractive. If you're small – well, you must not be as good...right?

WRONG!

Nothing could be further from the truth. Small is good. In fact, small is great. More precisely, “small” is the norm in churches across the country and around the globe. And “small” in children's ministry can be a wonderful thing. In his book, *Energizing Children's Ministry In the Smaller Church*, Rick Chromey points out these positives when it comes to children's ministry in smaller churches:

- **Significant Impact** – Smaller churches have the opportunity to make significant impact on a child's faith because they can often offer greater focus on each child.
- **Parent Ministry** – Small churches have great potential for effective parent ministry by more involved ministry to parents and getting parents involved in ministry.
- **Family Ties** – Small churches offer a close community of Christians, allowing children more opportunities to get to know other adults and kids in a much more personal way – and letting them see other Christians live their faith.
- **Service Avenues** – Small churches typically offer kids more opportunities to serve and lead in the church.
- **Exploration** – Small churches offer the flexibility to test and try new, creative, and innovative ideas with children that allow them to experientially develop their faith.

In short, your small church is uniquely positioned to have a big impact on the children in your ministry. You have flexibility and face-time with kids that's not afforded to bigger churches. Your small church is a force to be reckoned with on the front lines for God!

It's easier to lower your preparedness standards when you think there might be just a few kids. It's easy to slip into the mindset of "winging it." But remind yourself of this: Reality is just the opposite. With only a handful of kids, you have greater opportunity than ever to make a deep and lasting impact. Prepare for it! Regardless of who or how many might show up, start with a plan.

M: Move to Plan B

Your Plan A is in place: You're prepared for your average attendance and ready to go. But if drastically fewer kids show up, or if kids' age ranges are awkward (for instance, you have a 4 year old and a 12 year old sitting at the table staring blankly at you), then move to Plan B.

Note: Plan B isn't winging it. Making up Plan B as you go isn't acceptable; have it ready and your volunteers training to adapt in advance.

Plan B is your plan for what you'll do if your number or ages vary dramatically from what you'd normally expect. Determine beforehand how you'll handle such variances. Who'll lead? How will you organize your volunteers? Will you dismiss some volunteers, or use them in other ways? How will you mix age groups so older kids interact with and mentor younger kids? Is your curriculum geared to engage all ages? Where will kids go? Think through all the troublesome scenarios you've experienced in the past year: Too many kids, not enough kids, major age gaps, group imbalances (10 preschoolers and one teen, for instance). If it's a possibility, plan for it. That doesn't mean you need to create a new plan every week, but have a plan prepared for the major scenarios you face. Typically you can simply adjust Plan A, but you need Plan B for the big obstacles.

A: Always Focus on Relationships

Ministry happens best through relationships. This is true in mega churches, medium churches and small churches. The difference (and your advantage) is, when you have a very small number of kids, you have an exponentially larger opportunity to invest in relationships with them.

Note: Building relationships with kids means more than throwing out a passing "hello." It means intentionally engaging kids in conversations, learning about their lives, and continually finding ways to connect with them – not one Sunday, but always.

Whether you're in Plan A mode or resorting to Plan B, relationships must be at the center of your efforts. Curriculum and resources are important. Facilities and programs are important. But it's relationships – and almost nothing else – that greatly impact the life of a child for Jesus. Jesus Himself invested deeply in a small group aside from His wider ministry. Why? Because there's greater impact in small numbers. There's greater opportunity to teach, engage, guide, understand, befriend, and demonstrate your faith up close. So rather than bemoaning the fact that so few kids came, celebrate the fact that you have more time and energy to pour yourself into the lives of a few – just as Jesus did.

L: Let Kids Engage

One of the wonderful (and many would say most important) ways kids learn is by becoming fully engaged in what you're teaching.

Note: “Engaged kids” isn’t equivalent to kids working busily on a worksheet for the duration of class. Think of engaged as “involved, interested, and engrossed.” Not exactly what you get with a worksheet.

When you have 100 kids in children’s church, engaged participation isn’t always possible. Personal discovery isn’t always easy. Guiding children in life-changing experiences may be watered down because

there may be too many kids and too few adults. But with a small group of kids? What a blessing! There are so many ways to let kids participate. Think about these for starters:

- **Teaching** – Let kids “co-teach” the lesson. Engage them in reading the Scripture or retelling or acting out the biblical events.
- **Mentoring** – Allow older kids to help younger kids engage in all aspects of the lesson. Younger kids are thrilled by an older child’s attention, and older kids love to take on leadership roles. You have the perfect opportunity to invest in kids in a way that trains them to be leaders in children’s ministry – today!
- **Clarification** – You can engage kids deeply in what you’re teaching with dialogue that gauges their understanding of the lesson and the principles you’re teaching. As you talk with kids and listen to their feedback, address their misunderstandings or clarify how what they’re learning applies to their lives. In a smaller setting, you have the ability to answer questions as kids think through what they’re learning.
- **Mobility** – With a small group of kids, you’re blessed with flexibility. A spur-of-the-moment jaunt outside with five kids to enjoy the warm sunshine during a lesson on creation is totally doable. Not always so with a class of 25. Smaller groups offer mobility and open the door to creative ideas. Move to new locations – other rooms, outside, or in the pastor’s office (or not!)- to stimulate kids’ interest and engagement.
- **Service** – Service is a win-win for your kids and your church. Work with other departments such as adult classes or small groups to pinpoint ways your kids can serve them. Maybe it’s taking offerings, passing out brochures, cleaning up, or any number of seemingly small ways to serve. Engage kids in service projects for the community, too, and use these as a teaching tool. At a church I served at, we had children help create care packages for summer short-term missions groups to deliver to low-income neighborhoods. These packages opened doors to share the gospel. The kids who created the packages didn’t deliver them, but they were just as much a part of sharing their faith as those who actually made deliveries – and we made sure the kids knew it.

L: Laugh!

One of the key characteristics of any children’s ministry is fun. When kids and adults have fun together, everyone’s engaged. And if what kids are engaged in is meaningful and purposeful, then they’re learning in a way that impacts their lives for the better.

Note: If you’re an adult who fears fun, find a mentor – quick. Fun is not only good for learning, it’s also captivating for kids and will keep them coming back...which will help your ministry as a whole.

But fun can be threatened. Don’t allow your attitude to sour when you don’t have many kids show up. I remember feeling frustrated when the number I expected didn’t materialize. Instead of focusing on the kids who were there, I’d focus on the kids who weren’t. That attitude took the fun out of the

experience for everyone. Have fun with the kids who are there. Don't minimize their attendance by thinking of those who didn't show.



You may only have a few kids show up, but S.M.A.L.L. thinking will lead to flexibility, relationships, engaged kids, and laughter that strengthens your ministry – on every scale!



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