



Good Morning, Church!

By Rev. Dr. Carl K. Ellis, Founder and Executive Director
The Academy for Small Membership Church Ministries

Retooling Small Membership Churches for 2023 and Beyond

By Rev. Dr. Carl K. Ellis | January 20, 2023

Some days, we watch the news, listen to the pundits, scroll through Facebook and Twitter posts, and think there is no hope for our world. Some days, we who live in rural and urban settings know most students who graduate from our schools will never come back to our community to live and raise a family. When we sit at the coffee shop or have dinner with our friends, we feel like strangers in our community. We feel lonely, helpless, and unable to make a difference in our community. Our church keeps getting smaller, many friends keep moving away, and we feel insignificant.

There are new people and families with young children who move to our communities and, like us, feel there is no hope in the world. They thought they would know everyone, only to discover that our communities are sometimes more closed than the suburbs. Working ten hours a day, raising children, and trying to make ends meet is difficult. They long for relationships and to make a difference in their children's lives. Their community of friends keeps getting smaller, and they wonder if they are good parents and citizens.

The reality is that most people need healthy relationships and want to make a difference.

Unfortunately, we have forgotten the importance of the small membership church to people of all ages who continue to live in our communities. We have forgotten one definition of the small membership church: "family church." We are a church that can reach out to people of all ages and, each week, in different settings and times, help people find rewarding relationships that make a difference not just in their families but in their community and the world.

However, if we want our small membership churches to thrive, we need to retool. The definition of "retool" is "adapt or alter (someone or something) to make them more useful or suitable," as in "he likes to retool the old stories to make them relevant for today's kids."

First, small membership (family) church members need to remember that everyone is welcome. We need to rethink how we do worship, potlucks, and Sunday school. If we want to encourage people of all ages to feel welcome and part of our community, we need to adapt to our new day and age. This does not mean we change the gospel; however, we remember Jesus radically changed how people understood God's love and forgiveness in his day. We must welcome those we may see as different. Remember, people do not always come through the front door of the church. They come through potlucks, picnics, and living room chats.

Second, small membership (family) church members and those in our community want to make a difference. Like us, they want to make a difference that transforms the world, which will happen when we work together. The ways we support others do not have to be huge, but they need to help others. People don't want to raise money to keep the church alive; they want to be part of something bigger: helping children learn to read, helping seniors with transportation, sending a child or youth to camp, and so on.

Yes, we all search for healthy relationships and desire to make a difference. We, the small membership (family) churches, with God's help, the example of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, can be the place where people discover healthy relationships, and together, we make a difference.

Yes, when we retool and find ways to welcome and work together, our small membership churches will thrive, and we will make a difference in our communities and the world.



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