

JANUARY 2026

Insight Report

Small Church Realities

By Dr. Stanley E. Granberg, President



West Keene, NH - Attendance 35

RESEARCH

The CRC began surveying congregations in August 2024. The CRC project team created a survey which asked for essential identification and contact information along with a 26 question survey asking about demographics, worship practices, discipleship activities, community engagement, and congregational leadership. We used a variety of communication avenues (letters, postcards, advertisements, presentations at events, and personal interaction by a large team of informants) to connect with churches.

We have received survey information from over 2,500 congregations.

We are currently in the process of reviewing the entire database of churches to verify the existence and update the contact information for every congregation



BACKGROUND

In 2024 the [Lilly Endowment](#) injected a \$95 million dollar grant initiative into the American church ecosystem. [Pepperdine University](#) received \$7.5

million for Churches of Christ. Pepperdine reports that this Empower & Equip grant is "to provide resources to help churches in rural areas and small towns enhance the vitality of their ministries and strengthen the leadership of the pastors and lay leaders who guide them." Several of our universities are now engaged in projects supported by this Lilly Endowment grant.

The [Church Research Council](#) (CRC) is a data provider for this Lilly initiative. As well as providing basic information, we also are gaining observations and insights into our fellowship. This includes the rural and small town churches in which the Lilly Endowment is interested, the focus of this report.

in the database for *Churches of Christ in the United States* (21st Century Christian, 2018). The end result will be a new baseline of information about Churches of Christ in the United States.

CONTEXT OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST

The Churches of Christ are one of America’s larger religious bodies. Our congregations appear in all fifty states and in 2,391 of the U.S. 3,244 counties. At our zenith, between 1985 and 1990, estimates were that we had 1,645,584 adherents in 13,027 churches.

The numbers we are seeing now indicate that in the last quarter century, since 2000, our number of congregations have dropped by about 20% from the 11,984 congregations listed in the 2018 edition of *Churches of Christ in the United States*. The CRC

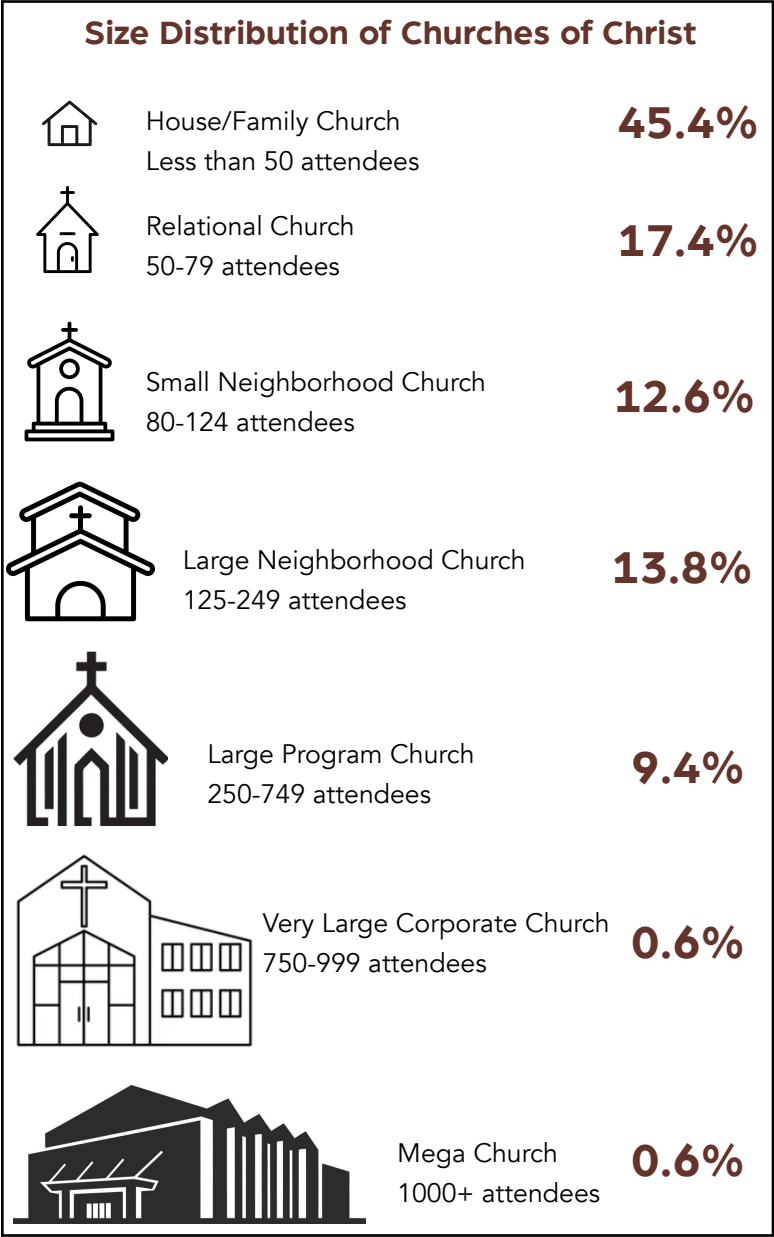
estimates that attendance is around 960,000 in something like 9,500 churches. These numbers will change as we continue to gather data.



Greenfield, MA - Attendance 30



Park Rapids, MN - Attendance 51



Churches of Christ are primarily a small church fellowship. 75% of our congregations are below 125 attenders on any given Sunday. The chart on the left shows the percentage of churches by size in 2018. Our current data does not suggest these percentages have changed significantly.

For the 2,500 congregations that completed a survey, the median size in attendance was 55 people with a membership of 53. This puts us slightly below the national average of [60 persons](#) reported for 2023. Over 60% of our current estimate of 9,500 congregations fall into this size range.

In our church ecosystem, congregations that are 60 or below can be described in two size categories. The smallest of these categories is the **House/Family church**. These churches are below 50 in attendance/membership. They typically have no paid ministers, consist of a few families (sometimes extended), have little structure to them, and their growth system is that of adoption. One becomes part of the church by being "adopted" into the family system. Roughly 45% of our congregations are House/Family churches. In the scope of the general church world these are micro churches.

The next larger church size category is the **Relational church**. These congregations range from 50-79 attendees/members. Some of these churches have a minister, but most do not. They typically have outgrown a house setting, so they tend to have their own small church buildings. Some internal structure is evident as they may have Bible classes and sometimes even elders. Their growth system is through relational connection. New people come because they know people already in the church and are invited to join. 17% of our congregations fall into this Relational category.

Our smallest churches can be thought of as anchoring our fellowship

Anchors provide stability, but anchors also keep things from moving. This insight report provides some observations into these small churches, looking at their benefits, challenges, and how they might best be engaged.

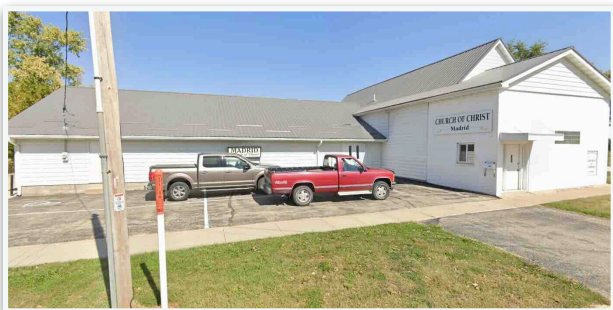
BENEFITS OF SMALL CHURCHES

The reasons for our small church majority could be explored at a later date, but contributing factors may include 1) our early rural roots, 2) lay leader emphasis,

and a 3) preference for nuclear family atmosphere (everyone should know everyone else).

The following benefits to having a majority of small churches give both rationale and direction for paying attention to small churches.

1. **Geographic breadth and depth into the country.** Only the Catholics and Southern Baptists have churches in more counties than do Churches of Christ. Our small churches give us footholds into a wide variety of social contexts. They are able to act as informants into the wide variety of felt needs and social settings in which they exist.
2. **They provide a sense of ballast to our movement, acting as anchors against the chaotic strains of culture change.** Small churches typically perceive themselves as places of safety from cultural pressures. Change occurs slowly in small churches. Too much change or too radical a change tends to fracture their relational foundations, so small church members tend to protect their status quo. The small churches remind those in the forefront of meeting societal change of where we have come from and who we have been as a people. Small churches serve as living reminders of our historical roots.
3. **Small churches have a flat hierarchy.** Since small churches can seldom support paid ministers they depend upon volunteers to lead their activities. This provides opportunities for a high percentage of their members to engage in spiritual leadership, which can lead to an extensive pool of rising leaders. Many of us may remember our first communion talk, Bible class



Madrid, IA - Attendance 55



Muscotah, KS - Attendance 15



Marysville, KS - Attendance 50



Moorhead, MN - Attendance 29



Imperial, NE (Westside) - Attendance 40



Alameda, CA - Attendance 46



Oakland, CA (Central) - Attendance 50

lesson, or sermon that we gave in a smaller church context that often does not exist in today's large church with its higher performance expectations. A missionary friend of mine who grew up in a small Kansas church once related to me how one woman Bible teacher produced nine preachers from that church, of which he was one.

Challenges of small churches

Small churches also present challenges that higher level leaders often find frustrating and inimical to their future forward ideas.

may receive new thoughts or activities once they have been formed and proven by larger churches, but they are not naturally early adopters of those ideas. Their inclination to safety makes them slow to change.

2. **They display a consistent need for attention with little capacity to add energy or momentum for a movement.** Small churches are always stretched thin in their ability to conduct their business and ministry. The loss of even a single key individual may radically impact their ability to function. This sense of constant need drives a desire for others to help them, yet that help may produce little to show for the inputs others provide them. From a positive view, this need sometimes provides purpose and opportunities for ministries, the Sojourners for example, to serve these small churches with their external resources.

3. **Their resource base is dispersed, rather than pooled, making it much harder and requiring more intensive and extensive work to tap.**

One missionary I know received funds for their work from over 60 small congregations. His furloughs consisted of over 2,500 car miles to visit church after church to maintain his support base. Missionaries, ministries, schools and universities all feel the pinch of time and resources necessary to raise funds from small churches. The result is we tend to position ourselves before the much smaller number of churches large enough to have an available pool of financial resources to fund our works. We find ourselves as competitive fund-raisers chasing the same limited pool of resources.

4. **The leadership capacities of small churches are geared toward entry level leadership.**

While small churches do provide opportunities for young leaders, these opportunities are typically entry level leadership tasks and roles. People with higher level leadership capacity

may go to university for schooling that prepares them to lead more people in larger churches. Women who want to pursue professional ministry find their opportunities in larger churches. The lack of financial capacity to support ministers drives higher capacity leaders out and up. The result is, when presented with ideas and ministry opportunities, small churches often lack the leadership capacity to make those ministries work.

5. **Small churches tend to be more 'results of' than 'progress toward' entities.** Similar to #2 above, small churches represent points of effort rather than launch pads for new efforts. Small churches absorb whatever time, energy, and resources others are willing to give them, but these resources seldom change their dynamic or energize activity beyond themselves. In most cases, movement making comes from the larger churches that have the leadership and abilities to engage the mission and energize the movement. The smaller churches will always be



Ashley Heights, SC



Torrance, CA



Temple City, CA

Small
churches are
people too!

there, downstream, to receive the benefit and results of what the larger churches do upstream. When speaking in terms of movement making, these upstream/downstream roles are inherent to the system, they are not manipulable.

How best might small churches be engaged?

The challenges of the small church act as inhibitors to engaging them. The endless need, lack of energy, and minimal leadership can, frankly, wear out helpers. So how might our small churches be engaged well? Here are some suggestions:

- **Recognize their existence and extend access to enrichment resources.** The neediness of small churches are their reality. These small churches have good people in them, dedicated and committed to serving them. These people need inputs for refreshment, thought, and encouragement to sustain them. Small churches should have access to the resources that energize larger churches and which larger churches can extend to them. The point is to design activities and resources for the larger churches that energize our movement while inviting the smaller churches to the table where they can feel a part and implement what they are able to do in their environments. As Joshua 3:16 describes God working upstream to save the people at the Jordan River, our most helpful efforts for smaller churches may be to work upstream of them.
- **Tap into their youth through experience oriented, regional activities.** Small churches seldom have youth groups, but they often will have a few youth. These youth can be recruited into regional opportunities that they would never experience at home. Camps, mission trips, and planned spiritual growth experiences can gather good sized pools of young people who can be deeply influenced for God in life changing ways. Colleges and universities are

particularly well equipped to present such activities. While only some of those youth may become students, they will always be a champion for those who influenced them for good.

- **For regional efforts, keep small churches informed and offer involvement opportunities that include funding for them.** Reduced rates and small church scholarships may provide that extra incentive necessary to draw small church participants who might otherwise not attend. Involvement in regional, longer term activities situates them into the downstream flow where they can receive the ideas and activities in ways that meet their context. They also become firsthand participants who can more accurately explain what is happening and dispel suspicions among churches in their networks that are not engaged.
- **Don't expect small churches to be change agents, early adopters, or platforms for movement making.** Remember, small churches are end result entities. They sit downstream from the active points of influence. They typically receive influence but don't generate it.

Conclusion

Our reality in Churches of Christ is the majority of our churches are **House** and **Relational** churches with attendance less than 60. To minister well to these churches we need to recognize their benefits and challenges. As downstream entities they need the opportunity to receive the benefits of momentum building activities while recognizing that they will seldom be momentum builders themselves. With this reality in mind, movement making activity will benefit from and encourage small church involvement, while focusing attention on those larger regional churches that have the capacity to inject energy and provide momentum within the region.

Small churches are downstream entities