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For the Life of the World

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The Day of Small Things

Andrea L. Schultz



Don't get caught up in numbers—the worship numbers, the attendance at meetings and events, or money—because you may not have the numbers, but the Word is still out there. The Holy Spirit is still working by your activities. The people (and not just your own members) see you and it'll bring fruit later. You just don't always know where or when it's going to be. The Church isn't numbers. Church is the people, the souls.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.”

Zechariah 4:8-10

Born in Babylon among the exiled Jews, the prophet Zechariah was called on by God to both admonish and encourage the remnant of Israel allowed by their captors to return home to begin rebuilding the temple. Construction had languished for years as crushing disappointment and apathy beset the returned exiles after devastating delays and obstacles crippled their work. These were the days of small things, when the size of their task, their numbers, and their progress blinded the Israelites to the greater foundations being laid by God through Zerubbabel, governor of the returnees and representative of the Messianic line. Used in construction, the plumb line in his hand would have been a cord with a weight attached to one end, which, when freely dangled, used gravity to establish a straight line.

The Rev. Scott Spiels has spent his entire ministry serving and ministering to the souls of the small, preaching of Him who set their paths straight. The Second Vice President of the South Dakota District, Rev. Spiels graduated from CTSFW in 1991 and was promptly called to a mission startup in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “We had 39 members and no building,” Rev. Spiels recalled. Resurrection Lutheran Church finally broke ground in '92, dedicated the

building in '93, and their pastor married their church organist in '94. “We had a good team,” Rev. Spiels said of his wife, who passed away last November. “We'd go to nursing homes together. She would play the piano or organ for the residents before or after. That was what we enjoyed about small church.”

They were there for 14 years, but when it was time for their son to start kindergarten, the couple—both of whom had grown up in country schools—



decided to accept a call out of the city to St. John's Lutheran Church in Wolsey, South Dakota, a town of 500 where everyone was either a farmer or rancher. The church has 230 baptized members but a peak weekly attendance of 94. Ten years later, Rev. Spiels took on two additional congregations, vacant but too small to afford a full-time pastor on their own. Zion Lutheran in Wessington Springs has over 90 baptized members with a typical attendance of 23, and Mount Olive in Woonsocket sees 12 a week. "After a few months, we called a retired pastor to be our associate to the parish," Rev. Spiels said, explaining how the workload stayed manageable. "He preaches at the two smaller congregations three Sundays a month, and I do all the other work for him—the funerals and everything else, and the one Sunday a month. It works very, very well. The churches are growing a little bit, even though they're small communities."

The following is Rev. Spiels' take on shepherding small congregations:

What are the blessings particular to a small congregation?

You get to know the people and the people get to know you. You have such wonderful relationships in Christ with the people. For the most part you know when people are sick or hurting or needing some help.

And the challenges?

How to get the youth and the young adults active in church. They have busy lives and they're just not very active. And the older people—the ones who are dedicated to doing the work—are dying. So it gets tough. But it just brings new challenges and new opportunities. We try to stay connected with the young adults, whether they're in church or not, to let them know what's going on and to keep them connected.

Pastors at small congregations are often tempted to feel like failures because of shrinking demographics and the size of their congregation. What would you say in encouragement?

Stick with it. Try and see the positive things that are going on. There are always positives. The message is powerful and it's going out to people. You may not always see the response immediately in their activity or involvement, but, as the Scriptures say, the Word isn't void; it's active and it's moving hearts. I've seen many times where, after I've done pre-marital counseling or confirmation, they walk away and then something happens and they're back. They come back to you for help. They come to the church. They may not be active but they know where the church is and where they need to be.

Don't get caught up in numbers—the worship numbers, the attendance at meetings and events, or money—because you may not have the numbers, but the Word is still out there. The Holy Spirit is still working by your activities. The people (and not just your own members) see you and it'll bring fruit later. You just don't always know where or when it's going to be. That's what I got caught up in: the numbers game. But that's not the Church. The Church isn't numbers. Church is the people, the souls.

Don't let the world discourage you. Understand that the work is spiritual. It's a matter of what you can't see and how the Holy Spirit is working in people in

the community. Though the membership is growing slightly at the two smaller congregations, the membership at St. John's is declining because we're not getting in as many new people as those being called home to the Lord. But it's active in the community. The LWML is known for doing quilts and layettes. I know that St. John's people in our community talk about St. John's. It's very well known. The community knows it's Lutheran. They know it's a church that cares. They know it's a church that will help, that's involved in everyday life as well as church life. I get asked to do weddings that are not from members, or funerals. I don't do them often, but from that I know we're recognized in the community. We have the opportunity to teach and bring Christ to the people.

Is it worth it?

Yes. Very much so. The joy is when you are helping somebody; when you're comforting them at the loss of a loved one; when you are sitting by their bedside, and you're bringing them God's peace, God's comfort; when you're giving absolution to someone who has just been stomped by the world. It's worth it. That's what we're here for. That's what God has called us to do.

The world rejoices in size; the world glories in strength. But in the day of small things, we remember that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what is weak to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). 🏰



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But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
2 Corinthians 12:9

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