

June 5, 2024 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

How can we best serve small and rural congregations?

The majority of PC(USA) congregations are small.

Phil Blackburn, Daniel Lee and Caroline Dennis

talk about important denominational issues from this perspective.

Seventy-five percent of congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are small-membership congregations. But 75% of our membership is in larger congregations. Being educated on that demographic and what these diverse churches might experience – from issues around pastoral salaries to volunteerism to decisions about church closings – is important. Phil Blackburn, Daniel Lee and Caroline Dennis discuss using our connectional system to benefit rural and small-membership congregations



Phil: Today, let's talk about how we use our connectional systems and structures to benefit small churches? We're trying to frame this in the positive. It is a GA summer. If you were king or queen of the PC(USA) for a summer, what would you like to see GA discuss around small churches? Forget about polity for a second. What would you like them to talk about?

Daniel: [This] could be very controversial: universal income. A universal offering for small churches, getting X amount of money to help with their ministry, whether that's through hiring ministers or whatever it is. I think universal helping would be great, especially because our denomination is disproportionately wealthier than local congregations, not counting big churches. What if we all gave up our pension and gave it to the current churches and see what they can do. I'm jokingly saying that, but only half-jokingly because I think there is something to [using resources now] rather than saving everything for later. What if we use some now?

Carol: I love that it would be a conversation. And I think part of it also is controversial. The question for me is balancing what is the gift of small, but also what are the existential questions for the small church? When is it time to shut the doors and let something else be born there? Sometimes the seed needs to go into the earth and die so that something else more fruitful can be born.

I worry about when we do provide the finances for things to continue beyond their organic life. And I find that hard in my own context, Daniel, because my church is wealthy enough to pay me. We just did a survey and saw that I'm the only person in my presbytery with a membership church membership this size that is full-time, so they'll pay me. But we struggle to get a sizable group out for a church workday. So we've got to make sure that there's life beyond putting a paid staff person in a place. I think the question the church needs to ask is how is God working with all these massive church buildings that do not have people in them?

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Continued

Daniel: I am in a camp that thinks we're "not dead enough yet," we need to die a little more before being resurrected.

Carol: That's my point — redistributing the money, which, in theory ... I'm excited about that. But is that providing life support where we maybe need to let things die?

Phil: That conversation would be manifold. I think this is part of the problem we get into when we start talking about small churches. We compartmentalize issues that are inherently related. In small membership churches, you might talk about mission initiative grants. That's a popular thing around the country: "We're going to give you \$10,000 to start a mission program." But that conversation and that work is divorced from realities around the building, staffing, congregational energy and vitality, realities around volunteerism in the small church, realities around the difference between being a small-church elder and a large-church elder. What I hear you guys doing is bringing these things into one conversation.

So, what is small church vitality and then what resources do small, vibrant churches lack to be more vital? And then what's the line? This is the hard one. I think it's easier to talk about universal income than to talk about the line between a vibrant congregation and one that is not dead enough yet.

And it's tough. No pastor's going to say, "Well, this church isn't dead enough yet. Let me see if I can kill it." So that's not the conversation that we may be having at the congregational level, even at the presbytery level. How could the denomination discuss that question, Daniel?

Daniel: I think [it is] twofold. It has to start from the hearts of individual members, but I also agree with asking how you measure and how do you measure the money will be used properly and effectively. But whenever I mentioned this idea, the first response is what Caroline said: it's "Oh, that's good, but..." I think we are a denomination that is full of rules and order, and we go to our logical thinking first.

Carol: In responding to Philip's question: what do we hope to talk about? I hope the GA is educated in the percentage of our churches in the PC(USA) that are small-membership congregations. Seventy-five percent of our congregations are small-membership congregations. But you flip that, [and] 75% of our membership is in larger congregations. We need to be educated on that demographic and on what those small churches look like.

We are diverse. How are we serving all these churches best? And it's really because [for] some churches ... it's time for resurrection, and that means a burial. And then there's other churches who need to be affirmed in what they're doing. I was on a Zoom call with some educators the other day talking about the youth that are coming to their churches and they didn't get Sunday school, they don't know the Bible. She was trying to do confirmation with this great hoard of kids who are coming and she's like, okay, this is the Bible.

I think this is a conversation in the PC(USA): that we have been buried in some ways, we are a phoenix in some ways, that there are people who are hearing the message coming out of Matthew 25, and they're coming to our churches because they're seeing something different than they're seeing in a lot of Christendom. But we have to be equipped. We who are pastors of small churches have to be equipped to provide that education to people who are coming from no faith at all.

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Continued

Phil: There's a broad conversation I think to have here, especially as it relates to small churches. One of the good things I can do, because I administer a grant program, is make all my events free. My cohorts are free, my retreats are free. All the resources that I give my pastors are free, [and] we tell them when we invite them to something at the University of the Ozarks, it will cost you nothing. We're paying your mileage, we're paying your hotel, your food, your resources. We're paying for the speaker.

As we think about the challenges of money and finance, and then trying to support small churches, we can see the barriers to doing the work, even when that work is an outcome of vibrant and rich ministry. Financial support doesn't have to just be people. It can be in-kind gifts. It can be a lot of different things where we can empower churches without them having to constantly figure out how they're going to come up with the money.



Phillip Blackburn is the director of the Thriving in Rural Ministry Program at the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, Arkansas. In addition, he and his wife Tasha co-pastor First Presbyterian Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Phil would love to hear your thoughts, ideas and stories about rural life and ministry. He can be reached at pblackburn@ozarks.edu.

The Rev. Dr. Daniel Siwon Lee is a multi-vocational PC(USA) minister, currently serving the community and region of Willard-Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church in Missouri. He maintains an active schedule as a concertizing baroque violinist, alongside his role as a faculty member at Yale University.



The Rev. Caroline Dennis serves as the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greenwood, South Carolina. She also serves as president of the Association of Smaller Congregations in the Synod of South Atlantic.

OUR WORSHIP CHANNELS

CLICK ON THE LOGOS



WORSHIP THIS WEEK.

Psalm 138

2 Corinthians 4:13-5.1

Sermon:

A balance in our favor.

ANNOUNCEMENT

CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

Sunday, June 23

following worship

ELECT OFFICERS

HEAR ABOUT OUR FISHBURNE PARTNERSHIP

LEARN ABOUT THE NEW PASTOR



calvin and Hobbes



This Week in History.



The Vandals, a Germanic tribe led by King Genseric, begin pillaging the city of Rome, causing widespread destruction.

June 2, 4455



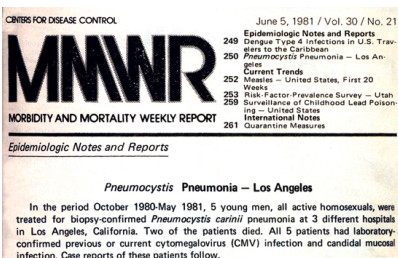
The Duke of Windsor, former King Edward VIII of England, marries Wallis Simpson in a private ceremony at Château de Candé, near Tours, France.

June 3, 1937



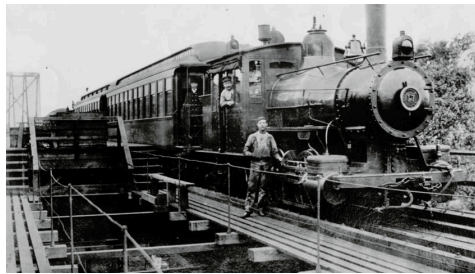
French King Charles VI grants a monopoly for the ripening of **Roquefort cheese** to the people of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, where they had been doing it for centuries.

June 4, 1411



The Centers for Disease Control reports five people in Los Angeles, CA have a rare form of pneumonia seen only in patients with weakened immune systems. These five patients would be the **first recognized cases of AIDS**.

June 5, 1981



The Chicago and South Side Rapid Transit Railroad, begins operation - the first elevated train system in Chicago. The tracks are still in use by the Green Line 'L.'

June 6, 1892



American Temperance crusader **Carrie Nation** begins her campaign of vandalizing bars and saloons in Kiowa, KS.

June 7 1899



President Theodore Roosevelt signs the **Antiquities Act** into law, authorizing the President to restrict the use of certain parcels of public land with historical or conservation value. The first National Monument is Devil's Tower, in Wyoming.

June 8, 1906