

Baptist Union of Great Britain

Small Churches Project

Report to Council, March 2005

Introduction

The Project arose from discussions within the Mission Leaders' Network and the Mission Executive about the ways in which small churches operate, and how the Union might be more helpful to them. The issue subsequently came to the National Strategy Forum, where it was agreed that a comprehensive investigation was called for, and Council gave its blessing to the Project. The Department for Research and Training in Mission was asked to take the lead, with the understanding that this issue touched on all departments and expressions of the Union's life, and therefore churches, associations, colleges and departments would be asked to consider what contribution they might make to the initial thinking and also to finding solutions to problems.

Twenty years previously, the celebrated study *Half the Denomination* tackled similar questions and alerted the Union both to the prevalence of Small Churches and to many of their problems. Unfortunately, that report did not result in many tangible changes to the benefit of Small Churches – mainly because there was no delivery mechanism. *Half the Denomination* contained a wealth of thoughtful analysis and excellent ideas, but lacked any process for implementation. From the outset of the current project, there was a determination to ensure that this mistake was not repeated and that there would be practical outcomes.

Executive Summary

Introduction

determination to ensure that there would be practical outcomes

1 Information Gathering

- statistics within the Annual Returns database
- Questionnaires
- Focus Groups and an Assembly seminar
- networks, committees, departments and individuals

2 What is going on?

encouraging that our small churches overall are growing, though only slightly

2.1 Findings from the Statistics

- half of churches in membership with BUGB are small (forty members or fewer)
- all associations have significant numbers of small churches.
- broadly, the smaller the church, the higher the age profile (except plants)
- rural areas have the highest proportion of small churches

2.2 Findings from the Questionnaire

- key positives and negatives about being a small church
- sources of help
- struggle to get consistent leadership
- reaching the community
- foreseeable opportunities and main obstacles
- support roles of Union and association

2.3 Findings from the Focus Groups

- advantages and disadvantages of being in a small
- likely sources of help were mainly relational:

3 Dynamics of the small church

- not the same thing as a scaled-down large church
- what are our strengths and how can we use them?
- people for jobs or jobs for available people
- simpler structures
- a culture of risk-taking more productive than tendency to conservatism

4 Small churches and large churches

Kingdom aims need to be paramount.

5 Ministry in small churches

- assumption that better ministers will find their way into larger churches
- Home Mission grants to non-accredited ministers will help small churches

6 Representation from among small churches

failure to be inclusive; a *small churches quota* for committees etc?

7 Small Churches and the Association

- Clusters
- Consultancy
- Strategic support groups
- Building / Legal advice
- Preaching resources
- Moderators
- Closures
- Resurrections / Replants

8 Training

- student placements.
- training in the dynamics of small churches
- training for leaders small churches, and anyone in translocal ministry

9 Evangelism and Mission

- many effective small churches
- further research: **What approaches and methods fit well with small churches?**

10 Children, young people and families

- critical mass numerically is the key
- why would Jesus lead Christian families on the move to settle only in large churches?

11 Worship

- can often be dispiriting in small churches
- what are the strengths of a smaller group in worship? Communion ...
- worship tailored to the needs and tastes of a small congregation
- release preaching from the stranglehold of the monologue
- new technologies to help with music

12 Small Churches Project - Process

Current: lists of Action Points with departments, associations, colleges etc.

Next: proposed Implementation Group to follow up on Action Points

Recommendation to Council that an Implementation Group be established

1 Information Gathering

This was the first phase of the Project and was done in the following ways:

- A large amount of information has been gathered from statistics within the Annual Returns database.
- Questionnaires were sent to a sample of 150 individual small churches (of which 125 replied). The associations were very helpful in ensuring a good geographical distribution. The sample was divided roughly equally between churches with a membership of 1-20 and those with a membership of 21-40.
- All associations were invited to set up Focus Groups, and many held more than one.
- Invitations to submit ideas went to a number of networks, committees and departments.
- At an Assembly seminar on small churches in May 2004, individuals were invited to give their views on the opportunities and challenges facing small churches (using the same basic outline that structured the Focus Groups).
- Lastly, several individuals have contacted the Mission Department spontaneously!

One of the early decisions to be made by the Steering Group concerned the definition of the small church. *Half the Denomination* had worked in terms of a membership of fifty but after much discussion it was decided to take membership of forty as our benchmark. We also looked at churches in the 1-20 members range to make comparisons with those in 21-40 members range, in case there were lessons to be learned from that exercise. The choice of forty members was somewhat arbitrary; it appears to be the most common marker ecumenically, although some would talk of thirty members.

There is the vexed question about membership figures and attendance figures, which are not always very similar, and a further question about the reliability of such figures as the Union is able to collect through its Annual Returns. We decided to stay with membership as a criterion because we have a little more confidence in these numbers than in numbers for attendance. The fact also remains that the small church cannot be defined purely by numbers attending. There is a dynamic which changes with numbers and it could well be argued that twenty-five members is a very different kind of small church from one with forty. At the end of the day, we opted for forty, though one or two exercises were done on the basis of fifty in order to make direct comparisons with the situation of twenty years ago.

All the information gathered in this way was then considered at a residential of the Steering Group (the Revd John Singleton, the Revd Stephen Cleary, the Revd Steve Mantle) augmented by a number of individuals with particular interest and expertise in the area of small churches. These were, Chris Mephram (BUGB Home Mission Grants Manager), John and Joan Saunders (who pastor a growing small church in Eynsford, Kent), the Revd Darren Blaney, the Revd Tony Taylor, the Revd Danny Beavan, Mrs Hilary Taylor (of the London Small Churches' Connection), the Revd Dr Craig Millward, the Revd Graham Wise (Baptist Rural Mission), the Revd Derek Allan and Miss Amy Sutton-Day.

From the meeting emerged no fewer than forty-three potential action points, directed at various parts of the Baptist family. The **Action Points** are listed as Appendix 1 and the **Research Findings** are available on request, though the text of the report itself makes copious references to both.

Before moving on to the main findings, it is worth commenting that the project has found a ready and often very enthusiastic welcome in many quarters. The very process of inviting leaders of small churches to share their experiences (good and bad) in itself proved to be an encouragement and also a signal to them that the wider Baptist family was not ignoring them; in fact, three associations spontaneously decided to set up networks for leaders of small

churches as a direct result of calling them together in a focus group for this project. The very high return rate for questionnaires (125 out of 150) is a further indication of the importance attached to the project by people in small churches.

All of this has spurred on the project itself, but also imposes a considerable sense of obligation to deliver tangible outcomes and, as you will see from the report, this is the ultimate aim. Although this document will be read and debated in several contexts, including Council, it should in no way be regarded as an end product in itself, but merely a means to the end of enriching the life and witness of our smaller churches.

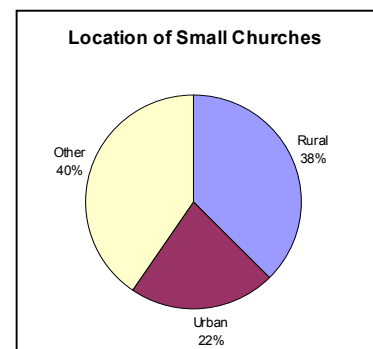
2 What is going on?

One encouraging finding is that our small churches overall are growing, though only slightly. This statement has immediately to be qualified in two ways:

- 1 some statistics were not available from churches that closed in the five years 1998-2003, and their inclusion would doubtless have had a negative effect on the overall picture
- 2 a number of church plants appear among our small churches. While this is obviously a very welcome state of affairs, church plants do tend to grow more often and more rapidly than longer-established churches and they may have made the picture more attractive than it would otherwise have been.

The simple message is that no association can afford to ignore its small churches and that some have a very significant number of small churches. When we investigated the age profile of small churches we discovered that, broadly speaking, the smaller the church the higher the average age of its members is likely to be. Again, church plants would be very different in this respect but overall this finding does have considerable significance for the way that small churches operate and also for how they approach their mission. More will be said of this later.

When we began to investigate where small churches were found, we ran into the difficulty of definitions of terms such as rural, urban, suburban, etc. We decided to keep things fairly simple and opted for three categories: **rural**, **urban** and **other** (which would cover small towns, suburban, etc). We discovered that there are considerable numbers of small churches in all of these classifications but that **rural** areas have the highest proportion of small churches and **urban** and **other** have considerable numbers of churches that are not small. Although small is often synonymous with rural, this is by no means always the case and what may be true for a small rural church in its dynamics and mission opportunities may well not be true for a small church in an inner city or estate context. Some of the variations and differences between contexts will be touched upon in the report.

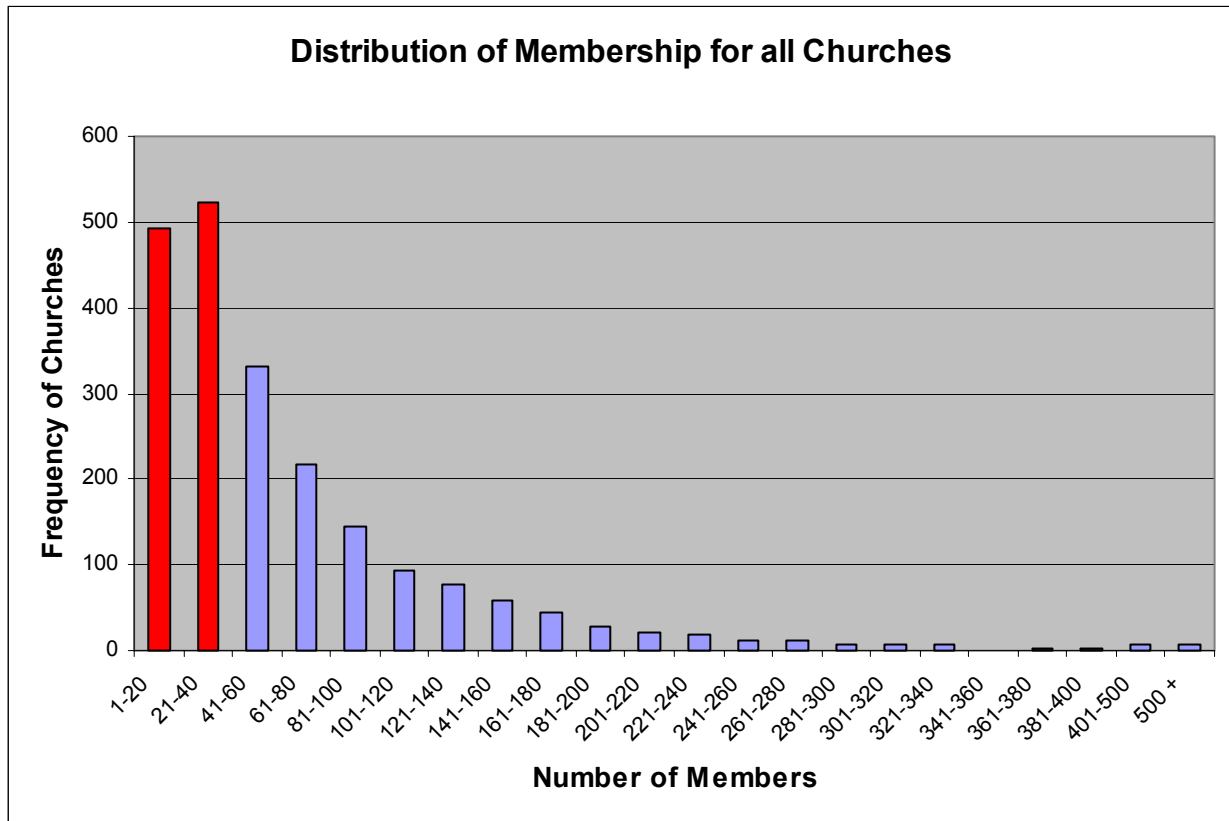


It should also be emphasised that national statistics inevitably hide huge variations from one place to another. There are small churches that have grown rapidly, just as there are some that have declined significantly. A handful of questionnaires were returned to the Mission Department uncompleted, with a note to the effect that because the church had grown so much in the past two or three years, it no longer qualified to be described as a small church, and therefore it would have been inappropriate to complete the questionnaire!

The **Research Findings** have been grouped according to the three main sources: BUGB statistics, answers to the Questionnaire and material from the Focus Groups (see *Appendix 1 for the detail*).

2.1 Findings from the Statistics

The chart shows the number of small churches in 2002 (half of BUGB total).



- 1 All of our associations have significant numbers of small churches. The advent of the Independent Methodists will further accentuate this profile.
- 2 Small churches very clearly have a much larger percentage of over 65s than the larger churches do – and every other category, accordingly, is squeezed. **In broad terms, the smaller the church, the higher the average age.** This fits in with comments and concerns from many small churches over the fact that they are lacking in the ‘critical mass’ of children, young people and young families they would need to attract more into their churches.
- 3 Yet it is worth bearing in mind that this is an average and not the case for all small churches. If we were to take an average small congregation with twenty-four attendees, there would be something like five children, one teenager, six between the ages of 22-50, five between 50-65 and seven over 65 years old.
- 4 The age profile for **newer small churches** (those formed in the last ten years) differs significantly. There is a much larger proportion of adults under 50, as well as fewer older adults and more children and teenagers than in small churches overall.
- 5 As regards the distribution of small churches in sociological areas, there is a fairly even distribution between the categories urban, rural and ‘other’ (meaning small

towns, suburbia and such like). Rural areas have the highest proportion of small churches; urban and 'other' areas having significantly more churches which are not small.

- 6 **In the ten years to 2003, ninety-one new churches were born and six of these died.** (For comparison, some eighty churches were closed during the same period). Of the seventy-two new churches that have given data recently:
 - sixteen had 1-20 members
 - twenty-eight had 21-40 members
 - twenty-four had more than 40 members.
- 7 As regards location, the urban and 'other' areas had more churches with 41+ members and least with 1-20. The rural areas had the reverse.
- 8 Newer churches were found in all three locations, with 'other' and rural ahead of urban in their share of all new churches. However, the rural areas had higher proportions of new churches which were small.

2.2 Findings from the Questionnaire

Positives

When asked what were the positives about being a small church, the following scored highly:

- friendly atmosphere
- everyone knows everyone
- prayer needs can be shared quickly with people likely to understand them
- pastoral support can be offered swiftly
- opportunities for the willing to get involved
- decisions can be made quickly and informally

*(Sadly, the **lowest** score in this section went to **able to grasp mission opportunities quickly**).*

Negatives

When asked what were the negatives about being a small church, the following scored highly:

- demands of legislation: Disability Discrimination Act / Child Protection
- too few people to do things
- restricted quality of music ministry
- shortage of money
- unsatisfactory building

Scores for negatives are generally lower than for positives - presumably a good thing!

Looking for Help

In listing sources of help, **the Association** and **churches of other denominations** came ahead of **BUGB**.

Nearby large churches, Cluster, and Baptist Colleges were at the bottom.

Ministry

Whilst 33 churches of the 125 in our sample had a paid full-time minister (almost all from the 21-40 size bracket), many small churches had to use considerable ingenuity to provide themselves with any form of consistent leadership.

One reply deserves to be quoted in full: *Elder-in-charge [unpaid] also acts as secretary / treasurer / organist / Sunday school leader [with wife].*

Reaching into the Community

The question about what the church is doing to reach its community with the Good News brought 358 replies!

Some were highly individual (*Post Office set up in church two mornings a week; computer centre for child and adult education*) and many sounded highly imaginative and ambitious.

The most common categories were:

- children's / youth clubs
- Alpha / similar
- community project involvement
- parent support
- coffee mornings

Foreseeable opportunities included:

- outreach
- youth work
- community work / links
- spiritual growth/nurture
- relationship-building

The main obstacles included:

- elderly congregation
- finances
- building problems
- more tasks than capable people
- finding leadership
- lack of youth and families
- community relations
- lack of ministry
- lack of numbers

The number of opportunities and obstacles roughly balance each other – 260 to 274.

The Association and the Union

When asked what the association / Union could do for them, the main answers were:

- encourage larger churches to get involved
- finance
- thanks
- encourage / include
- training

Differentiation

We wanted to try to discover if subdividing our sample according to size or location produced any variations from the overall answers. There were some minor variations, and these can be summarised as:

- The smallest churches tend to be struggling considerably more - with quality of music ministry, discontinuous preaching, and leadership being weak.
- The rural village churches find the 'flexible' issues (decisions quick and informal, flexible structures and grasp mission opportunities) an advantage more than the other categories.
- Council estate churches find the quality of their music more restricted.
- For all but council estate churches, an elderly congregation was the most often cited difficulty.
- The rural village churches anticipated the least opportunities.

2.3 Findings from the Focus Groups

The strong messages about the advantages of being in a small church were:

- People know each other well and are valued; close, family feel; friendly & informal
- There is a job for everyone
- Teamwork, commitment and ownership
- Simpler, flexible structures
- Relatively easy to give a warm, personal welcome
- Small reaches out to local community
- Pastoral needs made known (and met)

These negatives all scored strongly:

- Not enough manpower / too many jobs
- Limited finances and resources
- Limitations in conducting worship
- Vulnerable to one member's leaving / coming / domination

Suggested likely sources of help were mainly relational:

- Partnership with larger churches
- Resources database
- Small churches to network
- Link with other groups eg BB, Salvation Army, local authority
- Improve clusters

The plea to BUGB was basically to visit and encourage small churches, dispel the misconception that it sees large churches as 'right', and to be more creative in the use of Home Mission funding.

3 Dynamics of the small church

One very clear message that emerged repeatedly from the project was this: **a small church is not the same thing as a scaled down large church** (even if some actually had been much larger at some point in their history). There is an assumption that a church of, say, 70-100 members is a typical Baptist church and therefore a church of 30 or 40 members should be regarded as an emaciated version of this model. The message lurks among all sections of the Union, including within small churches themselves. The complaint is heard “we can’t do as much as a larger church”. While this may be true, it is emphatically not the point. Small churches are no more designed to do all that large churches do any more than the family saloon car is designed to do the work of a bulldozer. However, this mindset is deeply entrenched and needs to be challenged. If leaders and members of small churches could genuinely feel that their church (perhaps with thirty members) has an integrity and dynamic of its own, rather than being a pale imitation of a large church, there would be an immensely liberating effect. Along with this message goes the need to say to small churches: **play to your strengths**. These are many, as the previous research section has indicated.

It is a huge asset for a church to be able to say that it has a friendly atmosphere where everyone knows everyone and where needs are quickly and lovingly met. The small church can readily offer friendship and community, two qualities all too rarely found in modern society. Looking at the mission strategy, the starting point for a small church should be: **what are our strengths and how can we use them?** rather than **how can we tackle two dozen forms of outreach?**

At a number of points in the course of the project, the very worthwhile question was asked: **What is the aim of this project? Is it to turn all small churches into larger churches, for example?**

The answer is complex. **The main aim is to help improve the quality of church life of smaller churches**. Put another way, the concern is for their health and effectiveness (the word *excellence* is also used elsewhere in the report). This is not to deny that growth is not on the agenda. We would all rejoice at stories of small churches outgrowing their buildings, because this would be an indication of many being won to faith in Jesus Christ. However, numerical growth is not the first aim of the project. It is hoped and expected that it will be a by-product of churches discovering how to ‘do church better’ in their own context.

What cannot be planned and legislated for so easily is the spiritual level of a church of any size. Once again, we have to say that small church does not necessarily imply inferiority and this goes for the spiritual level of a church as much as for anything else. Small churches can grow in terms of spiritual depth and liveliness, and many desperately need to. However the same can equally be said for larger churches. A small church, vibrant with the presence of God and enthusiastically reaching out to its community with the gospel of Jesus Christ, will prove very attractive.

Another frequent plea encountered during the project was along these lines: **we haven’t enough people to do all the jobs**. There is another false assumption here that needs to be challenged, namely that a small church has to perform a certain number of ‘jobs’ in order to justify its existence. Many small churches do think in these terms, simply because they are trying to act as medium-sized or large churches. Instead of bemoaning the shortage of people to do jobs, the attention needs to be focussed on how many jobs are being attempted. No church of any size ever feels it has ‘enough people to do jobs’ but for a small church the issue is acute. It would be much more effective in kingdom terms if it would adopt a principle of attempting only what it can realistically do, and doing that well. **Not enough people for jobs** needs to become **only enough jobs for the available people**.

The small church's perception of itself also has implications for its structures. Some small churches have a structure identical to that of churches five or ten times their size, with a full quota of deacons, committees, organisations and such like. Where a church is the equivalent of maybe two housegroups in actual size, it is surely possible to make day-to-day and month-to-month decisions flexibly, whilst maintaining the legalities of having a group (such as deacons) as trustees. Put it another way, if a small church were starting from scratch, would it invent the kind of structure that it has now, or go for something simpler? Church plants always go for the simpler route, although they have a tendency to take on a more traditional look as time goes by. Perhaps long-established small churches can be encouraged to 'wipe the slate clean and start again' in terms of structures.

Much of what has just been said would also go for the question of leadership. Short lines of communications and small numbers should make decision-making easier if bureaucratic (and even quasi-parliamentary) patterns can be jettisoned. In a recent study conducted by Peter Brierley of Christian Research Association on behalf of the Salvation Army, it was discovered that there was a single factor that was linked with church growth. The factor was **dynamic leadership** (see the booklet *Leadership, Vision and Growing Churches* (p12) published by Christian Research). Whatever the leader is called, the quality and drive of leadership is key. To quote: *Knowing where you want to get to, and having someone with the drive to get you there are the qualities which make all the difference.* (p21).

It would be dishonest to give the impression that all small churches are warm, outward-looking and ready to embrace change. Some are these things and more, but many are not. In the course of the Project, some of the more worrying features of some small churches have repeatedly come to light, and these need to be listed:

- vulnerability to fluctuations in membership, and to self-appointed leaders
- domination by one individual or family
- resistance to change, preferring to wither and die as they are than contemplate change
- siege mentality, with hanging on seen as their over-riding value
- no contact with their community, indeed seen as a refuge from it
- grim premises

With the exception of the last point on that list, the real challenge concerns attitudes. This report contains several pleas for Kingdom thinking, which sets the priorities of the Kingdom of God above short-term or selfish interests. That plea needs to be heard in this context. The struggling small church that refuses to listen to what the Spirit is saying but chooses the path of irrelevance and decline deserves its fate (see Revelation 2-3).

Linked to this, comes the final point about the dynamic of small churches. Where a church is insecure, and perhaps fearful about its future, there is a natural tendency to conservatism and sticking to past methods. However, this attitude is frequently part of the problem. A culture of risk-taking would be far more productive. From a logical point of view, for a struggling church to go on doggedly doing things that have brought it to that point would seem to be a formula for extinction. Spiritually speaking, it has almost always been men and women of God who have taken risks who have broken through for the Kingdom, and there is no reason why this should not also prove to be the case in small Baptist churches.

4 Small churches and large churches

There were frequent references to the issue of larger churches partnering to help smaller ones. Some of these were impassioned pleas, even delivered with a measure of resentment that churches that were well-resourced in terms of people and finance were ignoring the needs of their smaller sister churches.

By definition, this issue touches all of us, whether in a small church or a larger one. There is an obvious logic in resources being shared in order to shore up the work in a small church that may be at risk because its own resources are slim. However, large churches are not invariably looking enthusiastically for such partnerships, perhaps regarding them as a potential drain on their resources and a diversion from their particular calling.

Sometimes the pleas for help were qualified when fears were expressed that inviting a larger church for help would result in colonisation or even a take-over. Although this is an understandable fear, as experience can demonstrate, there may sometimes lurk behind it a desire to draft in people and perhaps money in order to perpetuate an unfruitful and maybe outdated model of church, without contemplating the possibility of substantial changes. It would be entirely unrealistic for a small church to think in these terms.

The basis on which a healthy partnership might be formed needs further work, but it may be that a simple set of guidelines would be of value to the denomination when such partnerships are being discussed. Clearly, such guidelines need to be based on mutual respect founded on mutual understanding. The 'mutual understanding' is not to be taken for granted, as the dynamics of a small church will not necessarily be understood by people drafted in from a larger one. On both sides of the size divide, we are looking at the need to change church culture, climate and leadership attitudes.

In all this, Kingdom aims need to be paramount. It may be that the larger church will indeed lose some focus and the services of a number of its talented members, but if the end result is Kingdom expansion, then such sacrifices will have been worthwhile. Equally, the small church may have to accept new ways of doing things, along with the help that is offered, and this too needs to be taken on board for the sake of the Kingdom.

There would again seem to be a strategic role for the association in brokering such partnerships and then (discreetly) monitoring their progress and effectiveness. Although there would be major cost implications, the suggestion came from several quarters that a full-time BUGB staff member might be employed to work on behalf of small churches.

Perhaps the best way of encouraging churches, small and large, to think about Kingdom partnerships would be to tell good stories, and it is an intended outcome of the whole project that this should take place through the various media available to us. It has to be admitted that few good stories of large church / small church partnership came readily to mind, and good stories need to be unearthed and told.

5 Ministry in small churches

As our research has indicated, small churches frequently have to exercise incredible ingenuity to organise regular ministry. While the larger church can simply apply to the National Settlement Team, the small church is dependent on finding individuals locally who are both gifted and willing to undertake ministry, either as volunteers in their spare time or in some part-time capacity. There appears to be a fairly widespread assumption that better ministers will inevitably find their way into larger churches (the so-called career structure for pastors). Such an assumption, admittedly based on a certain amount of common sense and fact, does have the effect of saying to our smaller churches that second-class is good enough for them. The assumption that the most-able ministers should be expected to move to ever-larger churches is one that needs either to be owned or challenged within the denomination (and this means the colleges, the National Settlement Team and the Ministry Department).

Our research showed that a confusing array of labels can be attached to people who minister in small churches: some are accredited, some accredited and part-time, some accredited and retired, some locally accredited, some are officially recognised lay pastors, some are unrecognised lay pastors, others carry the label of elder. This profusion / confusion of labels points to a level of confusion in our understanding of what ministry is and it would be to the benefit of all of us, and not only those in small churches, if the system were clearer.

One unfortunate dimension to this confusion is that small churches, desperate for leadership, have been known to grasp at offers from people who are plausible but highly unsuitable. *False prophets* may come along because they are not listened to in a larger church but find that a small one, bereft of leadership, is all too willing to embrace them. Many regional ministers could tell horror stories of this sort, and of how they had to come in to pick up the pieces.

One of the strong current messages from Home Mission is that **every church is a Home Mission church**, and this is true. Every church in the Union benefits to a greater or lesser extent from the services of national and regional staff, all of whom are paid for by Home Mission. Every church has the opportunity to support Home Mission through its prayer and giving, and thus be part of the bigger picture of what God is doing through our churches in this country. Only some churches, however, receive money from Home Mission to support ministry and the current Home Mission rules restrict grants to churches calling accredited ministers.

It is not difficult to see how this ruling operates to the detriment of small churches. Indeed, there are many instances of small churches which give sacrificially to Home Mission only to see larger churches than themselves in receipt of grants for ministry, the like of which they would not be able to access. All this is leading up to a plea that the rules for Home Mission grants be looked at again, and for there perhaps to be a category of grant specifically for small churches, that could be given to non-accredited ministers and perhaps to ministers in retirement who would be serving a small church for an appreciable amount of time. Again, Kingdom values are at stake. The investment of Home Mission money to secure good but not necessarily accredited ministry for a small church in a strategic situation could have an enormous beneficial result.

All this is leading up to a plea that the rules for Home Mission grants be looked at again, and for there perhaps to be a category of grant specifically for small churches

6 Representation from among small churches

When a presentation to launch this Small Churches Project was made to Council in 2003, that august body was asked for a show of hands to indicate how many were members of small churches. From the 150 or more in the room, the number of hands raised was in single figures. No systematic research has been done to check whether a parallel situation exists within association structures, but there is a strong sense that leaders from small churches are unlikely to be found among the denomination's decision makers.

In some ways this is not surprising. Where a church has only two or three leaders, these same individuals tend to find themselves scurrying in all directions in order to keep in touch with both denominational and ecumenical developments. One example would be attendance at the Baptist Assembly, which both poses a proportionately greater cost on a small church's budget and greater strains on the small pool of potential delegates. The larger church, of course, has a larger pool of people upon which to draw, and so there is less likelihood of the same people being over-committed. However, the overall effect of this can easily be that smaller churches and their particular needs can be unwittingly bypassed in framing policy and making decisions. There is a need to make sure that the Union (and its associations) is user-friendly to smaller churches, and certainly to avoid measures that have the effect of discriminating against them. The fact that someone is a member of a small church does not mean that they have nothing to offer the denomination. Perhaps there should be a **small churches quota** operating alongside gender, ethnicity and age quotas when looking to compile names for committees and working groups.

7 Small churches and the association

In many instances, small churches rightly look to their association for help, encouragement, advice and sustenance, and are grateful to find it offered in generous measure. Indeed, it is often the comment of association staff that it is their large churches that seem to be more difficult to engage in association life, as large churches maintain that they have no need of the association's services. So what might an association's support for its small churches look like? The following list is largely based on good current practice, though some new ideas have emerged in the course of the Project.

7.1 Clusters

Clusters might justifiably be regarded as the Cinderella part of the Union's newly reformed structures. In many places clusters are working well and delivering mission. In many other places the picture is more patchy and unsatisfactory. May this be the time for a fresh drive aimed at promoting the potential of clusters in the recognition that smaller churches will often be the principal beneficiaries? Might it also be the time to replace the term **cluster** with one that promises a better future?

7.2 Consultancy

The experience so far gained from the Union's embryonic consultancy programme (reinforced by experience from other similar projects such as the ecumenical *Building Bridges of Hope*) is of the powerful effect of someone from outside coming in and spending time helping a church evaluate its mission and ministry and then look for ways forward. This is true for small churches and for large. The **outsider** can often help a church see the wood from the trees by asking apparently simple / innocent questions that can open up fresh insights and ideas. Sometimes the effect can be of liberation from the past and past expectations. This may be a form of permission-giving to discontinue outmoded patterns of work and to experiment creatively. The

association is ideally placed to introduce the **outsider**, and the BUGB consultancy programme is very firmly association-centred to that end.

7.3 Strategic support groups

Two association Team Leaders independently came forward with the suggestion of freeing small churches from some of the routine tasks that often practically sink them, by looking for people within the association who could fulfil certain roles. For example, the role of Treasurer is sometimes undertaken by individuals with limited gifting for it simply because there is no alternative. If someone could be found who would do the books for half a dozen churches, this would be a major blessing. The church's autonomy would not necessarily be compromised if the missing gifting were being supplied by the association. A similar model might be applied to mission strategy: why not have a mission strategist endorsed by the association to work with a handful of small churches? Other roles might also be contemplated.

7.4 Building / Legal advice

This is really an extension of the previous point. Very specialised knowledge is required at times when there are problems (or opportunities) with buildings. These are, of course, exacerbated if the church happens to have a listed building. Again, someone with professional knowledge of buildings and the stewardship of buildings could relieve a small church of a major burden and source of worry by acting as a consultant / steward for these matters.

7.5 Preaching resources

The LBA is compiling a database of preachers classified according to their particular styles and strengths, and something like this would be a valuable resource within any association. Because small churches are often reliant on visiting lay preachers, their Sunday diet tends to be inconsistent and someone within the association might be willing to draft sermon series to be followed by visiting preachers, in this way helping both preacher and congregation.

7.6 Moderators

Where a small church loses its minister (of whatever the variety!) the help of the association would normally be sought in seeking future ministry. It could ensure that whoever is drafted in as a moderator has an understanding of the dynamics of a small church and perhaps walk with that moderator as he or she seeks to exercise their gifts and guide the church forward.

7.7 Closures

The association is almost always drawn in when a church closure is on the agenda. Some work is being done in order to help regional staff and churches ensure that closures can be as healthy and positive as possible. There are some helpful *do's and don'ts* and suggested procedures. The issue of what might happen to any resources released by the closure of a church is also something for the association to take up and Jez Brown of SWBA has been taking a lead in this in consultation with Linda Holder of the Baptist Union Corporation.

7.8 Resurrections / Replants

There will be occasions where a church that is due for closure is actually situated in a community where there are great opportunities for mission, and it may have buildings that could be a major asset. What church planters often refer to as a **resurrection** is when, in effect, a new church grows out of one that is closing. Some of the original people may remain, although most of the new impetus would come from an influx of new people, and the church would be set up on a new footing from the old one.

Strategic decisions need to lie behind such a procedure and clearly the association is best placed to make such decisions.

8 Training

8.1 Initial training for ministry

One of the further research outcomes of the project will be to work with our colleges in order to determine what percentage of their ministerial students are being drawn from small churches. There is a suspicion that the colleges and what they have to offer are less well-known among small churches.

Further discussions are also envisioned with the colleges regarding student placements. With the church-based model of training now dominant, most students will find themselves pastoring a small church as part of their training. This is often of immense benefit to the small church itself and, of course, gives the student an opportunity to develop his or her gifting and gain valuable experience. However, the suggestion has been made that the longer-term effect on 'client churches', some of which have had a long sequence of different student ministers, may not be altogether healthy. Has the fact that they have bought into this arrangement actually inhibited their vision and growth? Further research is required.

It is clearly a good sign that a number of students each year settle in their student placement. This must indicate that the whole experience has been good. However, the question remains: are such placements regarded as little more than nurseries where inexperienced student ministers can make their mistakes and learn their trade before moving on to bigger and better things?

We would also like to enquire whether college courses include specific training in the dynamics of small churches. Clearly a student placed in a small church will experience these dynamics at first hand, but training in understanding the small church in its own right (rather than being seen as a smaller version of a bigger church) would be an important component of a college course.

8.2 Lay training

The move among our colleges to take what they have to offer beyond the walls of their institutions and make it available to all-comers is greatly to be welcomed. In particular, the Together in Ministry and Mission (TiMM) courses run by Northern Baptist College are greatly appreciated as a valuable contribution to the churches in the associations within their reach. The deliberate choice of a small church as the venue for training (and other) events also sends out a good message. Perhaps there could be more training specifically for people leading or about to lead small churches, and perhaps also for the denomination at large in order to help all of us understand what small churches are really like, and what they are trying to achieve.

8.3 Training for those in translocal ministry

Finally, we would make a plea that anyone in translocal ministry (at regional or national level) should have some training designed specifically to help them understand how small churches operate. People in translocal ministry will frequently be dealing with small churches and need to understand them on their own terms and in their own right.

9 Evangelism and Mission

The statistics indicate that our small churches are actually quite effective in bringing people to faith in Christ. Further, many evangelistic methods employed in larger churches are based on small groups. The fact that some churches are doing well should be held out as an encouragement to others.

Further research work is required here, simply asking the question: **What approaches and methods fit well with small churches?** - put more simply, **What works?** For example, given that the age profile of the typical small church is likely to be fairly high, it would be an obvious move to consider how the church might aim to reach people of similar age profile. Again, how is *Alpha* best tackled in a small church? What was said earlier about small churches not attempting every form of ministry known to man is extremely important. The advice to **do only a few things, but do them well**, is very sound.

Consultancy can play a key role in helping a church recognise the opportunities around it, identify its own strengths and summon the courage to leave old models behind in the pursuit of what the Spirit is saying. Although the programme is barely through its pilot stage nationally, there are already good stories of churches taking bold steps in mission and evangelism as a direct result of Consultancy.

10 Children, young people and families

This is an area in which most small churches struggle, and about which they can often feel either guilty or despairing, or perhaps both. Where children and young people are concerned, a 'critical mass' numerically is the key. If a church has a vibrant work among children or teenagers, it will in all likelihood be able to attract even more. However, once the church has only a handful of young people, only the very faithful (almost certainly children of church members) are likely to stay. Those who persevere may find themselves confronted with provision that is far from satisfactory.

The small church also tends to lose out when a Christian family moves into a new area. They are much more likely to try out, and ultimately settle in, a larger church:

- because larger churches are more visible and therefore easier to find
- because they perceive that there is a much higher likelihood that their family's needs will be catered for.

However, it seems unlikely that the Lord wants Christian families on the move to settle only in large churches.

Are there any solutions? Perhaps the only viable approach is to encourage small churches to club together. The 'critical mass' of children and young people might be achieved in this way and, by pooling the gifted leaders that are available, high quality youth work might be possible. If a small church has a partnership with a larger church, one dimension of that partnership might be to draw on the larger church's provision for children and young people - without simply consigning the whole family to the large church.

On a somewhat different note, it should be recognised that young families are not the be-all and end-all of church life. Some members of small churches can give the impression that all the church's problems would be at an end if it were able to attract young families, and this is not the case. Equally, some churches will always have a high age profile because of their geographical setting. Rather than bemoan the fact, the message is to get on with pursuing God's calling to them in their situation.

11 Worship

One association Team Leader commented in a letter that the worship in some of our small churches can often be dispiriting, and pleaded with the project for work in this area. There were also several comments in the research bemoaning the difficulty of finding suitable musicians and the fact that singing in a small group is not always an uplifting experience. Clearly most small churches will be restricted in the number of able musicians at their disposal and, by definition, small churches have small congregations.

What was said earlier about small churches needing to understand themselves in their own right and not as small (failing) versions of large churches is extremely important in this context. If worshippers have an image of worship based on their experience at *Spring Harvest* or the *Baptist Assembly* or *Leading Edge*, they are bound to be disappointed by their typical Sunday service. But large venues, large numbers and large worship bands are not essential to the worship of God. The mistake would be for two or three dozen people to attempt to imitate a *Baptist Assembly* style approach.

So what are the strengths of a smaller group in worship? The most obvious one would seem to be in the area of communion. Where two or three dozen people come together around the Lord's Table, they can do that very simply and meaningfully as a genuine family. Although the communion service at the Assembly is always an inspiring occasion, it is shared with hundreds of strangers who are *Baptist Family* only in the looser sense. In the small church there is a genuine coming together of people in close relationship with one another.

Secondly, worship can be tailored to the needs and tastes of a small congregation. Intercessory prayer, for example, can readily focus on individual and even personal issues (where appropriate) and can more easily be conducted as 'open prayer' than in a larger context. Preaching also needs to take account of the dynamics of a small church. Again, the *Assembly / Spring Harvest* model is unhelpful and it may well be that we should re-think what preaching should be in the small church. Perhaps we should be exploring the opportunity to release preaching from the stranglehold of the monologue. The evidence from the early centuries of the Christian church is that the whole congregation could be involved, contributing comments and questions whilst being led by someone suitable. Only when church buildings became larger and a professional clergy began to develop did preaching become the monologue of the chosen. It might, for example, be possible for preaching to be closely linked with cell or housegroup materials studied during the week, with feedback on the Sunday before a further passage or topic was discussed.

Music is not essential to worship but most people would hope to include it and there are clearly problems where musicians and singers are few (and perhaps more willing than able; and at times, scarcely willing). However, help may be at hand from new technologies in two forms:

- there are now several electronic instruments on the market that can sound convincing and acceptable, even in the hands of the relative novice
- there are several excellent systems for using pre-recorded music and backing tracks, based on the more popular collections of hymns and songs.

One contribution the Union might make would be to explore whether it could bulk-purchase such technology in order to pass on a discount to small churches by selling on at cost. **The key thing in all this is to discover what works and to follow best practice.**

One suggested outcome from the project is for further work on the conduct of worship in the small church and for this to be a basis of seminars and training sessions for those who lead worship. The Small Church Networks which are already appearing in several associations could be the means of delivering such on-going training, and also for the exchange of ideas and materials that prove their worth in the small church context.

Small Churches Project - PROCESS

1 Current Position

It has already been stated that this report is not intended to be the end product of the BUGB Small Churches Project. It is merely a step on the way. The aim all along has been to produce practical outcomes that would benefit and enrich the life of small churches, and this means that numerous branches of the Union's life would need to consider the implications of this report from their particular perspective and then address them as they thought fit. Accordingly, a comprehensive list of Action Points was compiled and classified according to who might be expected to tackle what (for example to departments, Association Team Leaders, the colleges). Because numerous Action Points are applicable to several bodies they are listed several times in the table. *These Action Points are set out in the table that is Appendix 1.*

Lists of the Action Points, complete with an accompanying commentary, were sent out to the appropriate people in December 2004, with a request that careful consideration be given to what tangible outcomes might be achievable. Some replies will, inevitably, come back in the negative – saying that the proposal from this Project is not wise, not feasible or not affordable. It is hoped that not too many responses will be of this nature, and, even where they are, that alternative ways of achieving what is wanted might be suggested.

2 Next

The Project embraces almost all aspects of the Union's life and has hitherto been led by the Department for Research and Training in Mission. A small Steering Group has worked very effectively with the Head of Department on the research and analysis, and the production of this report. *(The Steering Group comprised the Revds Stephen Cleary, Steve Mantle and John Singleton; and had input from Dan Yarnell, SMN for Small Churches).*

It is now felt that an **Implementation Group** needs to be set up, with the following remit:

- to dialogue with the departments, associations and colleges regarding the proposals allocated to them *(as set out in Appendix 1)*
- to monitor progress with each body
- to report on progress to Council (and perhaps the Trustees)
- to bring to Council any recommendations necessary to implement new initiatives
- to promote the cause of small churches and the Project throughout the Union

It is envisaged that the Implementation Group (numbering perhaps 5 or 6) would have a broadly based membership, with some continuity from the Steering Group. The Department for Research and Training in Mission would continue to be the *lead department* for the Project.

Appendix 1

	ACTION POINT	NEXT MOVE / MOVER	
	BUGB in general / Didcot		
1	Small \neq inferior, & big \neq superior; question of attitude & perception	Report Strong message to SC and large churches and their leaders Didcot staff visiting small churches BU choosing speakers from SCs (JAP)	#
2	Decision-makers tend to be drawn from large churches	Report Challenge BUGB / associations re inclusivity	#
3	Good ideas that are also God ideas Encounter with God	Bible study Consultancy	#
4	Too few people or too many jobs?	Report See 10	#
5	Fear of growth	Trusting God Bible Study	#
	Department for Research & Training in Mission		
6	Healthy closures	Report Work of John Bayes / MLN Pastoral, and process issues Who inherits?	
7	Resurrection opportunities	Report Ask colleges to consider module MLN and Linda Holder	
8	Outreach among / by older people	Report Look for models and stories RTM	#
9	Tell 10 <u>assorted</u> numerical growth stories of small churches	Report Example of Eynsford and simple differences that can be made RTM and Associations Go public! Possibly BT and a book (DVD?), for whole BU	#

10	Structures / models of church life appropriate to SC	Report and RTM Anabaptist / Urban Expression Theological Colleges (non-Baptist) and BRM	#
11	What does/could mission look like in a SC?	Report RTM and mission strategies Unpacking and defining 'mission'	#
12	Baptist Colleges 1 How many SC provide students? 2 What training given in SC 3 Dynamics? 4 Skills-based training (NVQ) 5 Effect on SC of student ministry 6 Lay training (NBC) and where given	Report Baptist Colleges, what are they offering? BCJCC Highlight what is good RTM Ministry Department	#
13	What evangelistic methods work in SC?	RTM Training packages with SC slant Promotion of Evangelism Resources Targeted promotion / vouchers (ATS and GS)	#
14	Large + Small 1 Good stories of partnership 2 Secondment of people 3 Kingdom thinking	RTM and Associations Bad stories of partnership	#
15	Healthy Churches	Report Quality for spirituality and size Risk-taking as a mindset Consultancy for SC (?NCD etc)	#
16	Training specifically for small church leaders	RTM Colleges and Associations (TiMM's) Packages, eg worship leading, evangelism (tailored for SC)	#
Ministry Department / NST			
17	Challenge concept of career in ministry (<i>cf church size</i>)	Report Training in the colleges NST process with Regional ministers	
12	Baptist Colleges 1 How many SC provide students? 2 What training given in SC? 3 Dynamics? 4 Skills-based training (NVQ) 5 Effect on SC of student ministry 6 Lay training (NBC) and where given	Report Baptist Colleges, what are they offering? BCJCC Highlight what is good RTM Ministry Department	#

18	Categories of ministries, and labels used	Report Ministry Department Distinction lay and ordained	
19	HM support for non-accredited ministers (<i>HM Rules</i>)	Ministry Department Grants Committee, Council	#
20	Local accreditation helps SC	See 18	
21	Small church moderators	LBA model of interim moderators National Settlement Team Ministry Department Training and gifting tailored to SCs	
BU Corporation			
22	Recycling money from closures, for benefit of small churches and mission	Report Support work of Jez Brown and Bernard Rouget and Linda Holder (trusteeship) SC claim to some of cash (if strategic)	#
Grants Committee			
19	HM support for non-accredited ministers (<i>HM Rules</i>)	Ministry Department Grants Committee Council	
Communications			
23	Sharing good stories	Raising morale and encouragement Communications/media	
9	Tell 10 <u>assorted</u> numerical growth stories of small churches	Report Example of Eynsford and simple differences that can be made RTM and Associations Go public! Possibly BT and a book (DVD?), for whole BU	#
24	Promotion and advertising	DIY pack Consultancy	
Faith & Unity			
25	Worship (and IT resources)	RTM (survey and National deal, ARC?) David Peacock (LST) etc. Good stories Bible study	#
10	Structures / models of church life appropriate to SC	Report and RTM Anabaptist / Urban Expression Theological Colleges (non-Baptist) and BRM	#

Associations / Team Leaders			
2	Decision-makers tend to be drawn from large churches	Report Challenge BUGB / associations re inclusivity	#
22	Recycling money from closures, for benefit of small churches and mission	Report Support work of Jez Brown and Bernard Rouget and Linda Holder (trusteeship) On behalf of SC, stake claim for some of cash (if strategic)	#
6	Healthy closures	Report Work of John Bayes / MLN Pastoral, and process issues Who inherits?	
7	Resurrection opportunities	Report Ask colleges to consider unit MLN and Linda Holder	
9	Tell 10 <u>assorted</u> numerical growth stories of small churches	Report Example of Eynsford and simple differences that can be made RTM and Associations Go public! Possibly BT and a book (DVD?), for whole BU	#
26	Strategic Support Group	Report Associations, NBA and Pat Took	
27	Liberation from the past / Expectations	Report Regional Ministers / Consultants Setting the Church Free	#
28	Intervention of 'consultant' (<i>Permission-giver</i>)	See 28	#
29	Preaching resources	LBA and database of preachers Themed set of services or outlines Video material/sermons	
30	Development of Clusters	Report Associations Reform Churches with common concerns	
31	Excellence	Report Resource (biblical) Regional ministers / consultants	

32	Support for Lay leaders	Associations (pastoral support) and Networks Good stories LBA model	#
3	Good ideas that are also God ideas	Bible study Consultancy	#
33	Larger churches attracting people away from SCs	Report Associations	#
14	Large + Small 1 Good stories of partnership 2 Secondment of people 3 Kingdom thinking	RTM and Associations Bad stories of partnership!	#
16	Training specifically for small church leaders	RTM Colleges and Associations (TiMM's) Packages, eg worship leading, evangelism (tailored for SC)	#
22	Small church moderators	LBA model of interim moderators National Settlement Team Ministry department Training and gifting tailored to SCs	
34	Resource Centres	Associations and Team Leaders meeting Located in SC buildings?	#
Mission Leaders' Network			
23	Recycling money from closures, for benefit of small churches and mission	Report Support work of Jez Brown and Bernard Rouget and Linda Holder (trusteeship) SC claim to some of cash (if strategic)	#
6	Healthy closures	Report Work of John Bayes/MLN Pastoral, and process issues Who inherits?	
7	Resurrection opportunities	Report Ask colleges to consider module MLN and Linda Holder	
11	What does/could mission look like in a SC?	Report RTM and mission strategies Unpacking and defining 'mission'	#

13	What evangelistic methods work in SC?	RTM Training packages with SC slant Promotion of Evangelism Resources Targeted promotion / vouchers (ATS and GS)	#
15	Healthy Churches	Report Quality for spirituality and size Risk-taking as a mindset Consultancy models for SC (query NCD etc)	#
Colleges			
17	Challenge concept of career in ministry (<i>c.f. church size</i>)	Report Training in the colleges National settlement team process with Regional ministers BU choosing speaking teams from SCs (JAP)	
12	Baptist Colleges 1 How many SC provide students? 2 What training given in SC? 3 Dynamics? 4 Skills-based training (NVQ) 5 Effect on SC of student ministry 6 Lay training (NBC) and where given	Report Baptist Colleges, what are they offering? BCJCC Highlight what is good RTM Ministry Department	#
16	Training specifically for small church leaders	RTM Colleges and Associations (TiMM's) Packages, eg worship leading, evangelism (tailored for SC)	#
7	Resurrection opportunities	Report Ask colleges to consider module MLN and Linda Holder	