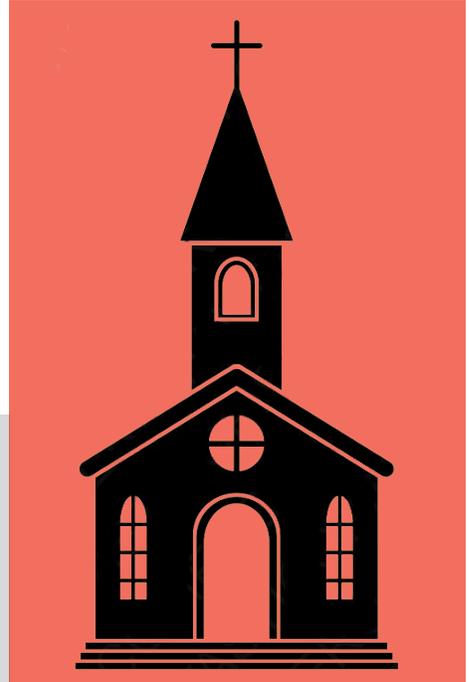


Listening to the Small Episcopal Church

In 2015, the Rev. Holly Scherff and Kim Gee (St. John's, Shenandoah) received an Alleluia Grant from the Diocese of Iowa to interview and listen to the small churches in Iowa. Small churches were defined as having average Sunday attendance of 25 or fewer. With a total of 59 congregations in the diocese, 29 were identified as small churches and 24 were interviewed. The goal was to listen to each of the small churches and parishioners' stories about dreams and frustrations and their relationship with the rest of the diocese. The initiative was inspired by the Dr. Seuss classic, *Horton Hears a Who*, when all the Whos kept calling, "We are here, we are here, WE ARE HERE." This listening initiative leans in to hear the small churches in Iowa.

As stories were shared, it became clear that Holly and Kim were hearing stories of what contributes to the health of the small church in Iowa. The stories range from St. James', Independence and their Hot Dog Fridays, to St. Andrew's, Waverly and their understanding of the importance of seed planting, to Church of the Savior, Clermont's passion for outreach in their community of Clermont, and St. Michael's, Mt. Pleasant who know that each of us has gifts to give.



Small Churches Included in this listening:

- St. Thomas, Algona
- St. Mark's, Anamosa
- Trinity, Carroll
- St. Andrew's, Chariton
- Grace, Charles City
- Church of the Saviour, Clermont
- Trinity, Denison
- Trinity, Emmetsburg
- St. Luke's, Ft. Madison
- St. John's, Glenwood
- St. Paul's, Harlan
- St. James', Independence
- All Saints, Indianola
- St. Matthew's-by-the-Bridge, Iowa Falls
- St. Mark's, Maquoketa
- St. Paul's, Marshalltown
- St. Michael's, Mt. Pleasant
- Trinity, Ottumwa
- St. Martin's, Perry
- St. John's, Shenandoah
- Calvary, Sioux City
- All Saints', Storm Lake
- St. Andrew's, Waverly

LISTENING TO THE SMALL EPISCOPAL CHURCH



FROM HOLLY AND KIM

The questions that have been consuming our conversations after our journey have been...What makes a healthy small church? What tangible things can we share with the small churches in Iowa? What is it they need to hear both good and bad? What is it the Diocese should hear, as well?

We want to emphasize the awesome things the small churches are doing right now...and that the small church is alive albeit limping at times. They want their community, the diocese and their parishes to know that they have a voice. And we feel that it is our sacred duty to give them this voice.

Healthy small churches are looking at ways to open their doors. They have invested in a good face-lift. They market their church. They ask people to join them. They walk with Jesus. To use an overworked phrase...*they do their own thing.*

Conversations amongst the church, the community, and the diocese must be ongoing otherwise isolation sets in. Healthy churches always look outside their walls for the needs of the community and act upon those needs.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY SMALL CHURCHES

- Ability to identify and work toward meeting need(s) in wider community
- Ability to plant seeds of faith and nurture them
- Ability to dream
- Respect for the gifts of the Spirit
- Desire to find ways to make sure all know their doors are open
- Realistic view of expectations and limitations
- An attitude of "Let's try it!"
- Ability to be realistic about their size
- Ability to see possibilities and act upon them
- Ability to use the gifts and talents of people in the congregation
- Able to evolve/adapt their physical structure to needs in community
- Ability to be open to changes
- A willingness to stay informed





■ FOR THE LOVE OF THE BUILDING

We found that the sheer love of the building keeps the doors open. So, we think good follow-up questions would be, “If your church building would burn down/blow away/fall in, would you still be a community? Would the people who come into this box still be together? Or is the building the only glue holding you together?”

Having reverence for the building can blind a congregation, or at the very least put blinders on. A few churches have explored the Recasting process from Episcopal Church Building Fund. Some have had success, albeit feeling like they, “had to for survival and to pay the utilities.”

But the Recasting must come from within. The diocese can provide support and ideas (resources, legalities, and direction) but must step back and let the small church bring forth their own ideas and thus their ownership of Recasting for it to be successful.

CHALLENGES FOR THE SMALL CHURCH



The people of the small churches really are seeking answers on how to survive and have great hopes for growth. They also face many common challenges:

- One voice dominates conversations (often a negative one).
- Balloon poppers—those who would find a reason that ideas, visions, or dreams (balloons), would not work without ever trying them.
- Self-reliant mind-set. Relying on the Holy Spirit to engage and lead us can be quite a challenge for the ‘I can do it myself’ conditioning that we have become accustomed to.
- Leaders who see the big picture vs. leaders who have their own agenda.
- Being truly welcoming to visitors while remaining a close-knit group.
- Adjusting from being a large church to a small church without feeling defeated and stuck in the grieving cycle, sometimes through generations.
- Maintaining and using a large facility with a small congregation.
- A bad leadership fit and/or few or no choices of clergy to serve the church’s needs.
- Unable to see a future or dream because of a veil over congregation’s eyes. For those congregations they must be able to identify their unique veil.

49%

49% of the Episcopal Churches in Iowa are considered "small," with 25 or fewer people attending on any given Sunday. 20% of the churches have fewer than 15 people attending on Sunday

20%

WHAT'S NEXT

The small-church study has given the Diocese of Iowa a gift in this listening. The small churches' responses to challenges and, more hopefully, their spirit of being small church in many of our rural communities, is inspiring. The interviewers have compiled some ideas about next steps in this adventure:

- Find ways to ensure that the small church voice is always part of the conversations about life in the diocese.
- Ensure that all know about available resources, including the resources that come from sharing experiences and ways of helping each other even across diocesan borders.
- Recognize when situations may be changing in communities and therefore churches' identities may also be changing; churches may need to explore this new identity in safe and supportive ways.
- Encourage churches to realistically assess their openness to new people and new ideas. Often, we all have blinders that prevent seeing opportunities for new life.
- Encourage and develop leaders who understand the larger picture and keep others thinking beyond themselves.
- Take the opportunity to be in conversation with other dioceses and small church communities, recognizing there may be gifts in the shared experiences.
- Find ways for small churches to feel they are an equal partner with the bishop in the decisions concerning the life of the small church.
- Identify the resources that small churches have access to in order to participate in visioning and planning.



- Congregations with an average Sunday attendance fewer than 10
- Congregations with an average Sunday attendance fewer than 15
- Congregations with an average Sunday attendance fewer than 25

SMALL CHURCH SUMMITS IN 2019
 April 13 Northwest Quadrant
 June 22 Southwest Quadrant
 June 29 Southeast Quadrant
 July 6 Northeast Quadrant

