

EXPLORING WORSHIP and MISSION in SMALL AND HOPEFUL CONGREGATIONS

INTRODUCTION



A series of workshops designed to help local Christians reflect on worship and mission in the context of being numerically small and filled with hope.

Small congregations are characteristic of the churches in Britain and Western Europe in the twenty-first century. This is not necessarily a sign of failure, though it may be due to decline over several generations. On the contrary, a small congregation can be a sign of hope. The failure is if the members continue to look back with regret, and if their church life and worship tries to maintain the same shape as when there were ten times as many in the pews.

A small congregation can be light on its feet, quick to respond to the changes in its community. The members are likely to know each other well, and care for each other, in ways that, in a large church, have to be found in small groups within the church.

Many emerging churches or fresh expressions of church are intentionally small in size. If they grow, their strategy is to multiply so that they form a network of communities in diverse locations, rather than one large congregation, which expects everyone to come to it. New forms of church are inclined to be salt and light where people already are.

What this resource seeks to do is to resource such small and hopeful (not small *but* hopeful!) congregations. Each session is based on a notion of feasting, with the possibility that participants will meet around a meal, and the activities or discussions will take place during or between courses.

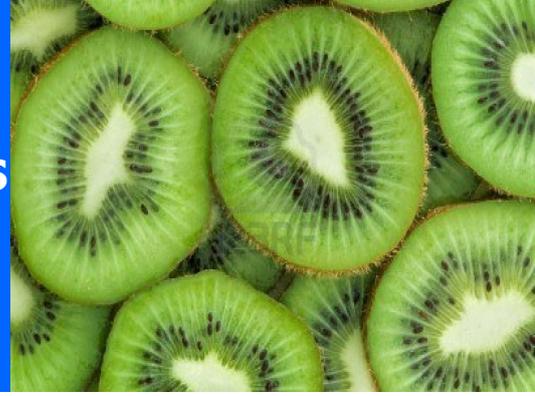
There are four sessions:

Small and understanding who we are looks at the identity of a small congregation. We are not large congregations writ small, but have our own characteristics. We set out to question a culture which values size, expansion, growth as signs of success.

Small and celebrating who we are recognises that the Bible often looks to what is small: the mustard seed, the individual who is knit together in the womb, known and loved by God. Participants are invited to think what they value about this church, this fellowship.

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Small and who we could be begins from the notion of transformation, through sharing who we are and what we bring to the table. Individuals are parts of different networks, and so a small group can reach out in a variety of ways.

Small and living beyond ourselves widens the circle. God's mission means being willing to take risks. The session includes gathering together the symbols and words from the previous sessions, with a commitment to moving forwards.

Each session includes a meal of some kind, and grows out of mission thinking that develops through the series.

The writers come from their own experience of working creatively with small congregations.

Karen Stallard is minister of Union Chapel, Islington. With a nationwide reputation as a centre for the performing arts, Union Chapel is a great example of the power of a small and hopeful congregation and what it can achieve.

Peggy Jackson is Archdeacon of Llandaff for the Church in Wales, and also cares for a number of small village churches. She celebrates the diversity of small congregations, which are free to be yeast in their communities in different ways.

Clare McBeath is minister of Openshaw Baptist Tabernacle, East Manchester and a Team Leader with Urban Expression, a UK mission agency. As part of a small congregation/mission team, Clare seeks to engage with her increasingly diverse urban community, naming hope through story telling, creative arts and poetry.

Ruth Harvey works for a rural Presbytery in the SW of Scotland, offering training to 12 parishes. She values 'the greatness of the small' and believes in particular that small ecumenical groups may hold the answer to most of the challenges in our church life.

We are grateful to Jan Berry, Janet Wootton and Wayne Hawkins who formed the planning group to develop the "Exploring Worship and Mission" series.

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Preparation

You will need to prepare for each session of these workshops, but here are some points which relate to the whole series; they will help you in your initial planning.

- **Set out agenda:** In each session it will be helpful to give participants some idea of what to expect in terms of theme and timeline and to explain that we will use different ways of reflecting: writing, drawing, clay, silence and words, prayer and discussion.
- **Leadership:** each session needs a leader or facilitator who is skilled in creativity; keeping time; and creating a safe and open space which encourages others to join in. Whoever leads storytelling needs to be comfortable with creative storytelling, listening and holding silence and able to kneel on the floor (a cushion helps) but doesn't necessarily have to be the person who leads the rest of the session. It is also important that someone gives advance notice to participants setting out the aims, mission thinking and objectives of the workshop; and someone needs to identify people who are happy to set up the room, cook, and help others to prepare food. These tasks may be carried out by the same person who leads the sessions, or you may prefer to identify two or three people who can work as a team and share the different roles.
- **Ground rules:** these need to be agreed at the beginning of first session together, with a reminder each time. These should include such areas as confidentiality, only speak when you want to; listen without interrupting; listening and accepting the contribution that others make i.e. there are no right and wrong "answers", keeping to time; and anything else which group members feel will help them to contribute and share.
- **Space and time:** each session gives details of what you need to do to set up the space, whether this is a room on church premises or meeting in someone's home. But you may want to note at the beginning that each session includes sharing food, so you need to consider the practical arrangements for this, whether you want to heat food, and so on.

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