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**Planting Churches in Smaller Communities****Presented by: Roland S. Barnes****Introduction:**

- 1) **The history of a small Church in a small community:** How many of you have ever heard of the Bible Presbyterian Church in Walker, Iowa? This small rural Church planted in a corn field was begun in 1894 when Captain A. R. O'Brien held evangelistic services in a school house. Soon afterwards the Cono Center Presbyterian Church was organized. In 1946 a student pastor named Max Belz came to the Cono Center Presbyterian Church, and in 1948, under his influence, leadership, and faithful adherence to the Bible, the fellowship of the Cono Center Presbyterian Church left the unbelief that had overcome the Dubuque Presbytery and formed the Bible Presbyterian Church of Walker, Iowa. Perhaps you have heard the Belz name before. Max Belz and his wife Jean had eight children: Sara, Mark, Tim, Julie, Andrew, Mary, Nathaniel, and Joel. Perhaps you have heard of Joel Belz, the editor of World Magazine. By God's grace this small church in this small community has done great things! In 1951 just three years after its organization, the Bible Presbyterian Church began what is arguable its most significant ministry, Cono Christian School. Today it is an international boarding school with an enrollment of 82 students. Students have come from as many as 40 different states and 25 foreign countries. Eighty percent of its over 390 graduates have attended college. It has among its alumni doctors, attorneys, nurses, missionaries, pastors, teachers, farmers, and business people. In 1980 a young boy from Ethiopia came to Cono. He was the first of perhaps 100 Ethiopians and other foreign students to attend during the 1980s. The Bible Presbyterian Church is a small church in a small community. The membership is about 66 and its total receipts for 2001 were reported to be just \$55,168. What an amazing thing God has done in a corn field in Iowa.
- 2) **My Own Experience:** In 1981 I received a call from Central Georgia Presbytery to go to a small town, Statesboro, Georgia, and plant a Church. There was in existence a core-group/launch team of five families: ten adults and seven children. I am still the pastor of the church that was organized in February of 1984. There is now an established church and a Christian school with a combined budget (church and school) of almost \$750,000. Statesboro and Bulloch county was a small town community of around 35,000 in 1981. It is still a small town although it has almost doubled in population over the past 20 years. CAN WE PLANT CHURCHES WITH SIGNIFICANT MINISTRIES IN SMALLER COMMUNITIES? Of course, I believe the answer is "yes!" SHOULD WE PLANT CHURCHES IN SMALLER COMMUNITIES? Of course, I believe the answer is "yes!" Since 1978 I witnessed Central Georgia Presbytery double in size, from about 18 churches and almost 4,000 members to 37 churches and five missions and almost 8,000 members. 17 churches were planted since 1978 and all of them are in what you call smaller communities: Thomasville, Statesboro, Forsyth, Lake Oconee, Milledgeville,

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Warner Robins, Savannah, Macon, St. Simons, Albany, Harlem, Evans, Columbus, etc. Not a one of these communities have more than 300,000 people and most of them are communities of less than 50,000.

### I. What is a smaller community?

Options: What is the standard? New York City / Tokyo / Mexico City

**16-20 million / 30 million +** If this is the standard then cities like Chicago and Atlanta are small communities! Is it:

- a. less than 1,000,000
- b. less than 500,000
- c. less than 100,000
- d. less than 50,000

One statistic that I read defined metro areas as more than 250,000 in population. In our presbytery there are only five counties out of 105 that have a population of more that 100,000 and none of those have more that 300,000. In other word, we don't really have any communities that would qualify as *metropolitan*

- A. How many such communities are there in the US and Canada?
- B. Or What percentage of the population lives in such communities?

According to the 2000 US Census about 21% of the population live in rural or non-metro areas. That is almost 60,000,000 people. Another source stated that 25% of the population in the US lives in towns of 50,000 or less.

- C. How many PCA Churches are presently located in such communities?

I could not find any statistics on the PCA. However, it is my educated guess that a great majority of our churches are located in non-metro areas. And many of our Presbyteries encompass vast regions of our states where there is no metropolitan area.

And these areas are also growing in population. According to the 2000 US Census non-metro areas increased in population by 21% in the West, 12% in the South, 5% in the Northeast, and 6% in the Midwest.

In their book, *No Little Places*, Ron Klassen and John Koessler mention several trends with respect to population growth in small town areas.

*Trend #2: Nonfarm, small-town population is increasing.*

"During a recent ten-year period, U.S. towns of twenty-five hundred or less in nonurban areas (population centers of less than fifty thousand) grew 4.9 percent. Twenty-five percent of all Americans live in these towns. This compares to a 2.4 percent increase in urban population during the same period. In spite of all we hear about urbanization, these statistics show there is actually a greater movement toward small towns than toward the cities."

*Trend #3: Small towns are experiencing massive demographic changes. p. 58*

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"Professional white-collar people are moving to small towns, transforming them into bedroom communities." p. 58

"Industry is also rapidly shifting to small towns where they can find more cost-effective work forces." p. 58 **Example: Briggs and Straton/Statesboro**

"Retirees are also revitalizing small towns, according to *USA Today*, 'from the mountains of Appalachia to the deserts of the Southwest. . .Experts anticipate a flood beginning in the next decade when the baby boom generation begins to retire.'" p. 58

"The Gallop Organization recently asked Americans in what kind of place they would like to live. Nineteen percent preferred the city, 22 percent a farm, 24 percent a suburb, and 34 percent a small town." p. 59

Of course, it is strategic to plant churches in the major metropolitan areas of our country, but at the same time we must not neglect to smaller communities! I don't think that the Apostle Paul restricted his church planting efforts to the most populous cities.

II. What were the populations of some of the churches planted by the Apostle Paul? Acts 13 and 14

13:4 Seleucia; 13:5 Salamis; 13:6 Paphos; 13:13 Perga; 13:14 Psidian Antioch; 13:51 Iconium; 14:6 Lycaonia, Lystra, and Derbe.

None of these cities were what we might call "*metropolitan*."

Perga, "*Outside is a Roman stadium and a theater cleverly built into a hillside. The seating capacity, some 12,000, is an indication of the population of the city in imperial times.*" ZPEB, Vol IV p. 701

**Populations of First Century Cities and Towns:** We know that Paul wanted to go to Rome and planned to go to Rome, but why did he not go there first, if he was only concerned with metropolitan areas?

Rome	<u>1.5 million</u>
Alexandria	<u>600,000 - 1,000,000</u>
Syrian Antioch	<u>500,000 - 800,000</u>
Tarsus	<u>200,000 - 400,000</u>
Corinth	<u>400,000 - 500,000</u>
Thessalonica	<u>200,000</u>
Ephesus	<u>200,000</u>
Philippi	<u>40,000 - 80,000</u>
Colossae	<u>50,000 - 100,000</u>

I think that we can conclude that Paul went to large, medium, and small sized cities and towns. Since Philippi was a small town of about 40,000 - 80,000 I would like to look at it for just a few moments.

III. Church planting in Philippi: a small town with an unlikely core group or "launch team." Acts 16:11-40

Paul went to Philippi because he was divined directed to this city which has been considered by many as the gateway to Europe. There he preached the Gospel outside down by a river. He had no building or auditorium, no school building to rent. God was gracious and in a little time he had his core group or

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launch team. It was comprised of three people along with some members of their families, two women and a man.

1. Lydia: Acts 16:11-15
2. A slave girl: Acts 16:16-18
3. A jailer: Acts 16:19-34

Now how many of you would like to come and plant a church in a community of around 50,000 with a core group or launch team of three persons: a single business woman who is not even from the community and perhaps has limited contacts, a former psychotic-spiritist, and a jailer? As we soberly and calculatedly consider what is most strategic we would probably by-pass this place, and yet the Lord directed him there! He was called there by the Lord Jesus Christ, and God was pleased to build a great Church!

I think that this can still happen and does still happen in smaller communities all over our nation and I think that we should be planting churches in these places!

#### IV. Planting Churches in a Presbytery of Smaller Communities

##### 1) The demographics of Savannah River Presbytery

**See “demographic” information / population growth**

##### 2) What percentage of these communities are unchurched?

According to *Barna Research Online* the Northeast is 44% unchurched, the South is 26% unchurched, the Midwest is 32% unchurched, and the West is 33% unchurched. I think that he must be counting all churches including Roman Catholics and he is considering affiliation as “churched.” In reality I think that the South is in the range of 40-50% unchurched and the other regions of the country are even worse. The point is this: there are many people who need to hear the gospel in our country and 20-25% of them are living in small towns and non-metro areas.

##### 3) Identifying growing communities?

Usually we think first of the large metropolitan areas where there are more people and where we think that we will have a greater probability of success. But we need not to neglect the 20-25% of the population and we need to remember that there is numerical growth there as well.

*No Little Places: Trend #2: Nonfarm, small-town population is increasing.*

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We have done a study of the demographics of all of the 47 counties that make up our Presbytery and tried to identify the communities that were growing. We then identified 9 of these communities in which we would try to plant churches. One of the biggest problems is recruiting men to come to these Philippi's of 50,000 people or less.

#### 4) Recruiting Church Planters for Smaller Communities (risk reduction)

Thus far we have been able to find good men, some assessed and some not. Here are some alternative ideas.

##### a) Associate/Assistant Pastors

Larger churches with multiple staff develop a vision for the smaller communities and use their staff to assist in teaching Bible studies, etc. in a small town target area and/or hire a man as an associate or assistant with the idea that he will be prepared to leave and plant a church in a neighboring small town.

##### b) Ruling Elders

Gifted ruling elders can be licensed to preach and sent out to smaller towns to assist small groups and Bible studies in establishing a core group or launch team.

##### c) Epaphras, a case study

Hendriksen: "Who planted the church in Colossae? Paul may have passed through Colossae on his third missionary journey. . .But the book of Acts gives no hint that the apostle founded any churches on this trip."

". . .it is certain that among the many who came to hear the apostle when he labored in his headquarters at Ephesus there were people from the Lycus Valley. . .Epaphras. . .was in all probability the actual leader of the churches of the Lycus Valley."

Z.P.E.B. "A native of Colossae and founder of the Colossian church. . ."

"Paul's high esteem for Epaphras is seen in the terms he applies to him, 'our beloved fellow servant,' 'a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, (Col. 1:7)' 'a servant of Christ Jesus, (4:12), and 'my fellow prisoner' (Philemon 23)."

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We need to pray that the Lord will give us many Epaphrases to go to these smaller communities and plant Churches to the glory of God!

5) What size churches can we reasonably expect to plant?

Many men do not want to go to a small town because to them that means a small insignificant ministry in a small church.

a) The average size of US churches

Barna Research Online: *"The average number of adults attending services at a Protestant church during a typical week remains stuck at 90, the same total as measured in the prior year's study. This reflects a 10% decline from the 1997 level (100 adults), and a 12% drop from 1992."*

*"Church attendance was highest in the South, where the typical church as 100 adults who show up. . ."*

b) Home runs versus singles (paradigm shift?)

Matthew 13:23 The parable of the sower and the four soils perhaps could be applied here. The sower is the same, the seed is the same, but the soil is different. Three soils do not produce lasting fruit. The good soil produces lasting fruit but not in equal amounts. *"Some a hundred-fold, some sixty, and some thirty."*

Not everyone is a hundred-fold pastor. There are some men who are exceptionally gifted and exceptionally blessed. I think we err when we think that we can go to a large and exceptional ministry, study the paradigm, go back to our church and imitate it and get the same results. Where is the Holy Spirit in this equation. God causes the growth. Yes, we must be a diligent and faithful as we can be, but we do not all have the same gifts or the same strength of gifts.

You don't win the World Series with home runs. Barry Bonds is a home run king, but his team did not win the World Series. You win games with singles, and doubles, occasional triples, and some home runs. We have hundreds of 30 fold nobodies who are willing to go to the thousands of nowheres in our nation and plant churches.

Instead of constantly focusing on the homerun megachurch, we ought to focus on planting hundreds of singles! I am not sure, but perhaps we would be healthier if we had 20 one-hundred member churches working together in a Presbytery than if we plant one 2,000 member church. We might be better off if we actually practiced the presbyterianism that we profess!

c) Practicing Presbyterianism

1. Churches team up in a region

The Churches in a region can team up and begin to identify the surrounding smaller communities in which they could plant churches. They could then begin to pray for these communities. It is often the case

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that members from their churches will know people in these smaller communities and sometimes members of their churches will move to these communities.

2. Develop R.E. leadership/licensed to preach

See: IV. 4 above

3. Take on Associates/ Assistants

See: IV. 4 above

4. Longer time frame

Be willing to give more time for the development of a church plant in a smaller community. It may take longer to get established. We give a church plant 3-5 years to get organized, and we provide Presbytery support on a decreasing scaled, year by year.

6) What is a significant ministry?

In their book *No Little Places*, Klassen and Koessler challenge us to rethink our ideas of success and significance! Many men who are considering church planting only think of metropolitan areas. They think that only large communities will produce large churches. That only large churches can have significant ministries. *"If you can't plant a church of at least 500 members you are wasting your time."* What is a significant ministry?

***No Little Places:*** "Our culture idolizes size. . .we know this attitude has made deep inroads into the church." p. 13

"I sat down feeling that if I were as good as they were, I would be pastoring a large church too. Shortly afterward I caught myself apologizing for the size of my church. When introduced, I would say, 'I pastor a small church of only seventy-five. I confused size with significance.'" p. 13

### **PART I: Struggling With Significance**

#### **Chapter One *Five Myths of Ministry Success***

"Equating successful ministry with images something like these (large ministries) is probably the rule rather than the exception. In seminary we had one big-name pastor after another paraded in front of us, held up as shining examples." p. 19

"In our professional world, 'success' is usually (though sometimes not admittedly) defined by such criteria as the size of the congregation and the impressiveness of the physical facility." pp. 19-20

#### **Rejecting the Lies**

"The root of the problem lies in the fact that we have bought into false standards and expectations." p. 20

"The only way out of this trap is to expose these seductive myths and reject them as the lies they are, then begin to measure our ministries by God's standards. What are these debilitating myths?" p. 20-23

1. *The Numbers Myth: To be significant, a ministry must be big.*
2. *The Big Place Myth: To be significant, my ministry must be in a big place.*
3. *The Recognition Myth: One measure of the significance of my ministry is how much recognition I receive for it.*

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4. *The Career Myth: Career advances are signs of a significant ministry. "To the extent that we are motivated by career advancement, we undermine our own ministries."*
5. *The Cure-for-Inferiority Myth: If I can just succeed professionally, I'll no longer feel inferior."*

### **Embracing the Truth**

1. *The Quality Principle: God judges my ministry not by its size, but by its quality. p. 24*

"It is true, of course, that the New Testament reports on the numerical growth of the church, but such growth is always attributed to God, not credited to people (e.g., Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 3:6). Never does Scripture use numerical growth -or lack of it- to evaluate an individual's ministry." p. 24

"Scripture calls us to servanthood, humility, faithfulness, and right motives. It does not call us to produce big numbers." p. 24

"Today the term *church growth* is used almost exclusively to mean numerical growth. If the numbers go up, the church is growing." p. 24 "Such thinking is overly simplistic. Numerical growth can take place for wrong reasons." p. 24 "Even numerical decline can at times be a sign of health." p. 24

"A healthier understanding of growth will focus on the *quality* of the life of the church more than on quantity." p. 25

"Growth in evangelism should not be measured by the number of converts a church wins each year, but by the number of opportunities it provides for others to hear the gospel. Evaluation should also measure the church's efforts to equip its members for evangelism." p. 25

2. *The No-Little-Places Principle: Wherever God has called me to minister is an important place." p. 26*

"We admire missionaries who serve in tiny villages halfway around the world. We don't question the significance of their work when it takes them years to develop a small congregation." p. 27

"In reality, though, living in a larger city seldom means larger influence." p. 27 "Strategies that say we should go to urban areas because more people are there may need to be rethought. True, there may be a million people within a twenty mile radius, but the statistic that counts is how many lives we are able to touch." p. 27

### **Page 28 quote from Francis Schaeffer**

3. *The Glory-of-God Principle: God calls me to seek His glory, not mine.*

"That is, I am to serve in a way that inspires others to think more highly of God, not in a manner to make them think more highly of me." p. 28

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." (Luke 6:26)

4. *The Vocation Principle: I am to approach my ministry as a calling, not as a career. p. 29*

"Do I want to serve the Lord or do I want to serve my ego?" p. 29



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"It may be crowded under the spotlight, but there is always room in the shadows for those willing to be servants." p. 29

5. *The Unconditional Love Principle: God loves me because He is love, not because of anything I do for Him.*"

"This means His love for me does not increase as my accomplishments increase." p. 29

**Luke 10:20**"Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in the heaven." **/Mark 1:11**"Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." p. 30

a. **Spiritual maturity, the focus of ministry:** Col. 1:28-29 / Galatians 4:19

A ministry is significant when it focuses on the gospel and its fruits in the lives of people; when the focus is on spiritual maturity. Not just quantitative growth but qualitative growth as well.

b. **Covenant Children**

The kingdom of God can grow as families are won to Christ and as children are brought faith and nourished in the faith. This is often overlooked and downplayed. It is often not as extraordinary and glorious, but it has great potential. It is not either/or (pagans or covenant children) it is both/and.

c. **Impact upon the church "catholic"**

Our churches are a part of the church catholic. When we begin to evaluate the significance of a church in a community we should consider the impact of that church on the other churches of the community. This is not quantitative but qualitative. It should be our desire that other churches of our community be better churches as a result of their interaction with the membership of our church. We can practice the catholicity of the church.

d. **Net growth: impacted by mobility**

What happens with respect to numerical growth is often not just a matter of numbers. A church may have ten "reaffirmations of faith" which are, in reality, conversions, and at the same time have fifteen people transfer out because of moves to other communities and the membership decrease by five.

**Resources:**

Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996.)

Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating the Ministry From the Success Syndrome*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987).