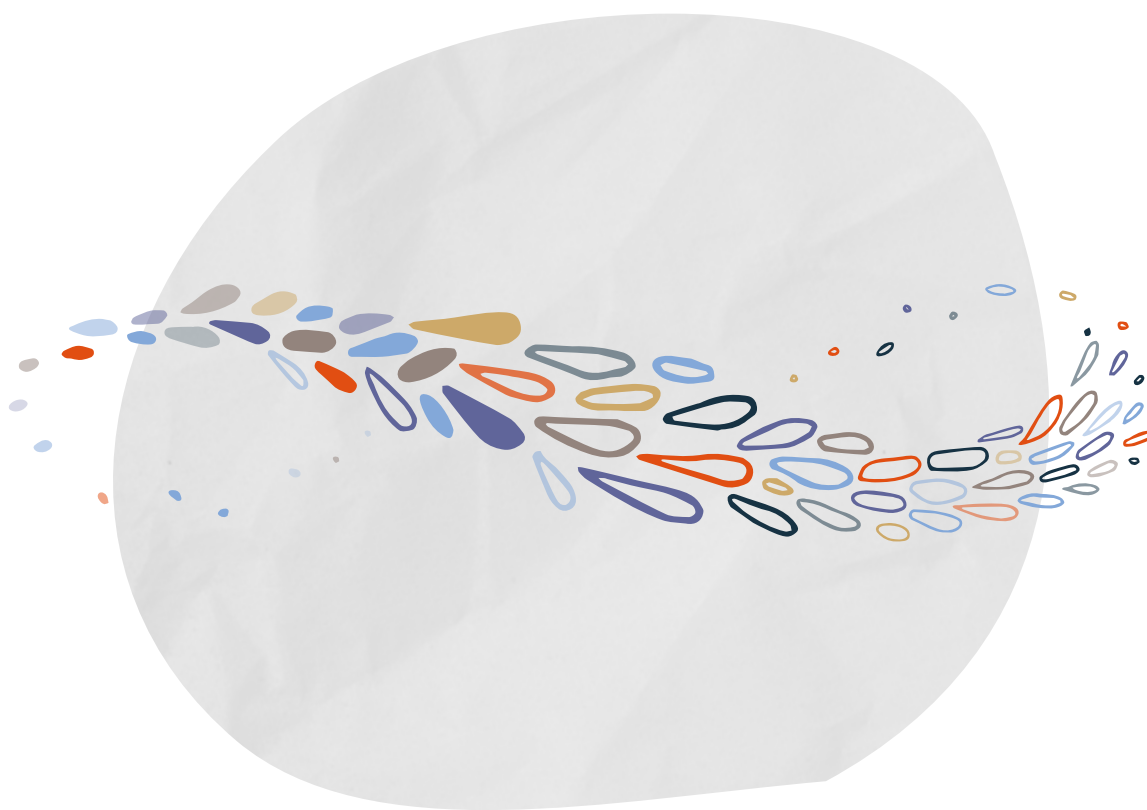


Flourishing

SMALL CHURCHES



Learnings and Emerging Questions from the Flourishing Small Church Cohort

JANUARY 2026



“
I used to think small was
inferior. Now I know small is
life-giving and sustainable,
in ways beyond our metrics.”

INTRODUCTION

Written by Kathleen McShane

Director of Learning & Innovation at Wesleyan Impact Partners

For over 20 years, the Learning and Innovation team at Wesleyan Impact Partners and Texas Methodist Foundation has worked with ministry leaders across a broad spectrum of denominations and contexts, to ignite imagination toward the renewal and empowerment of a Spirit-led Wesleyan movement of love, generosity, and belonging. Our work allows us to see, from a slightly outside-the-system angle, the places where faithful and compassionate community takes root, where ancient traditions are adapted and renewed with grace and beauty, where the good news of the Christian Gospel blossoms into changed lives.

In 2023, we began to ask some questions that were new to us. We wondered:

What if the smallness of so many churches in United Methodism isn't a problem, but an asset? Is it possible that *smaller* is a design feature for church rather than a flaw? Is it possible that congregations of only a few dozen people are what God needs to be whole and holy partners in making visible God's dream of love, justice and freedom in local communities?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', or if we want to work toward making the answer 'yes', how will we know if a congregation is doing the right things--the things that make it an expression of God's dream for the world? What is the character and skill set of leadership required for churches that are focused not on numerical growth but amplification of their impact?

What are the needs—for leadership, resources and attention—that will allow churches to be small gardens where faith, hope and love grow abundantly?

These are the questions we were asking as we gathered a group of nine small churches (average worship attendance under 50) that nominators had named as flourishing. For a year, the pastor and a lay leader of each of these congregations told stories that allowed Wesleyan Impact Partners to study their ministries, their life together, their core commitments, the ways they transmit faith. The cohort met, with three experienced facilitators, twice in multiple-day in-person gatherings, and almost a dozen times via Zoom. The participants were eager for the conversation; they generously shared their experiences and wisdom, their stories of failure and frustration, and sometimes their fear about doing ministry in settings where finances always feel precarious.

“

We see you.

We see and affirm that you are
the Church, just as you are.

Your work matters.”

Over the year, cohort participants would tell you, their churches thrived even more. Not because anyone solved their problems, but because someone shined a light on them and said, ‘We see you. We see and affirm that you are the Church, just as you are. Your work matters.’ We heard, again and again, how much these pastors and lay leaders needed to hear that, and how regularly they hear a message that says they are not good enough.

This report is the story of what we saw in these flourishing small churches. We are not researchers, and the work outlined in this report is not comprehensive or exhaustive. Our study included urban, suburban and rural churches, but not the full set of diversities this subject deserves. We urge more and sustained attention to churches like these, with a much greater breadth of demographics and contexts.

And still, we offer this report believing that the stories of these churches represent a larger picture of what is both evident and possible across the United Methodist Church in the U.S. and in small churches that are flourishing in other denominations as well

That picture is full of hope. But it also calls out to us for more. More focused attention, more resources, more appreciation of the ways in which small churches might lead the church forward in this time and in our calling to be the Body of Christ in the world.

LETTERS FROM THE COHORT

Dear Innovative Pastor—

You should come lead a small church. Here you'll find members who are already connected and engaged with their neighbors, and a congregation that has earned a reputation for generosity and service. We've already learned how to be flexible and adaptable, and we know all about lean starts!

Dear Neighbors—

Maybe we should stop waiting for the government to come and create a community that cares for everyone. There are people right down the street who have organized a food pantry that's open to anyone who's hungry, and a ride to the hospital if you have an emergency. They'll even check in on you when you're feeling lost or alone. The help we've been waiting for is right here, right now; and it's being organized by a small church in your neighborhood.

Dear Bishop—

If you listen to small churches like ours, you will hear stories of resilience and new trust, of hope and imagination, of risk-taking and immense blessing. And then can you share these stories, of churches that are working overtime, with few resources, to make a huge difference in their communities?

Dear Bishop and Cabinet—

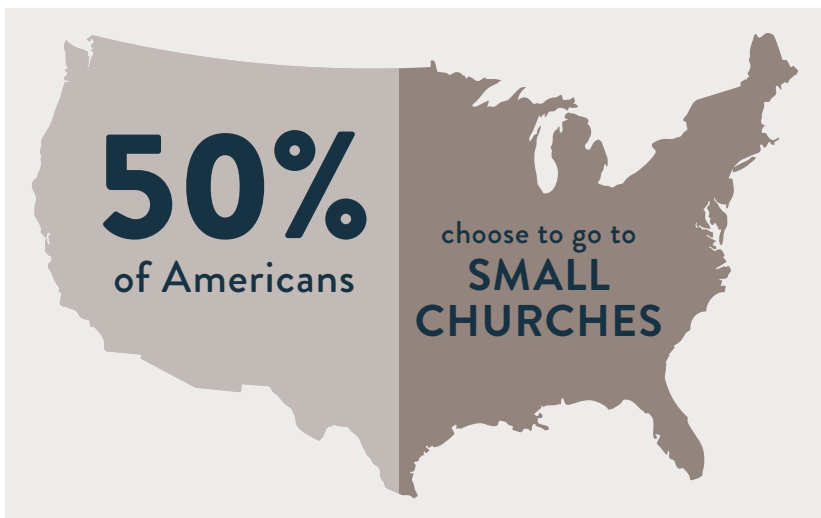
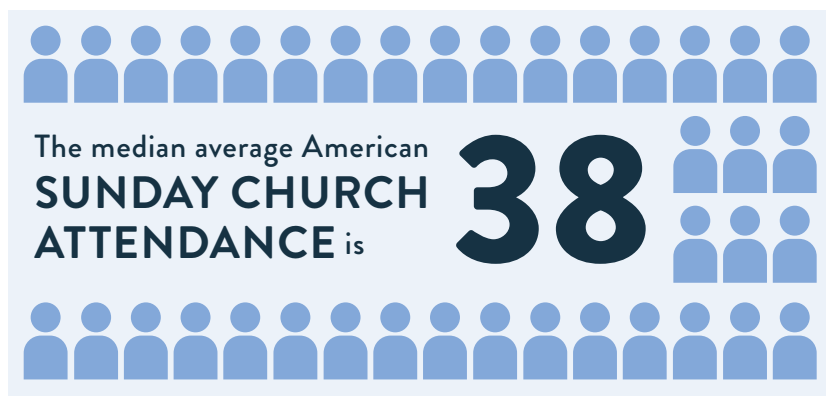
I love my church. We may not be growing in numbers, but that doesn't seem to matter, because here's what we value more: growing the depth of each congregant's faith. That's the kind of growth that helps us to see and respond to the hurting world around us. And isn't that the work that Jesus was about? We're inviting you: Come and see the faithfulness, the depth of community, and the service that are being nurtured at our church.

Dear church resource providers—

What if there was a conference that gathered and shared the wisdom of pastors and lay leaders from small churches, who don't have the time or resources to publish a book or promote themselves?

THIS IS OUR PRESENT *and our future*

We call them small churches but in fact the churches that were part of this cohort are normative for the United Methodist Church. These are the churches that are carrying the Christian tradition, impacting their communities and changing peoples' lives.



CONTRIBUTORS

This publication centers voices from the field. Our Learning Partners — lay and clergy leaders — share from lived experience. Our Insight Interpreters help illuminate what these congregations are teaching us.

Learning Partners



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SMALL CHURCHES, *outsized presence*

NEHALEM BAY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NEHALEM, OR

Nehalem Bay UMC (Nehalem, OR): A rural coastal congregation living an abundance mindset through authentic welcome, expansive outreach, and creative care.

JOSEPH UMC JOSEPH, OR

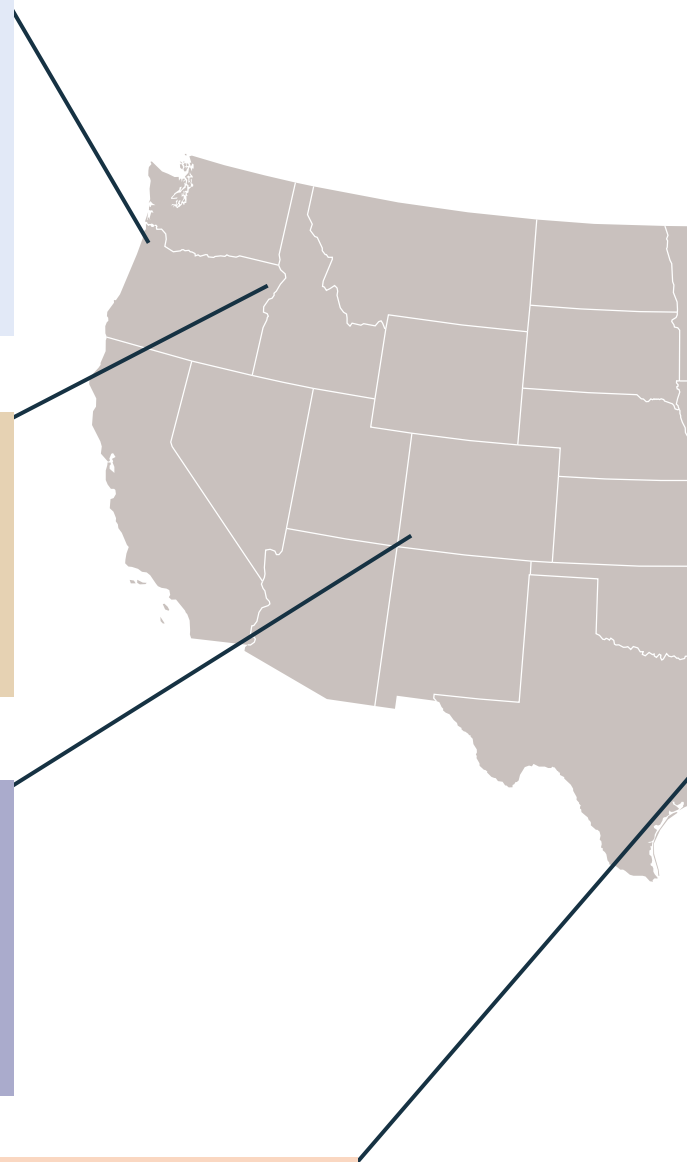
A rural church that has grown into a bold trusted community partner by instigating, coordinating and hosting generous collaborative dinners.

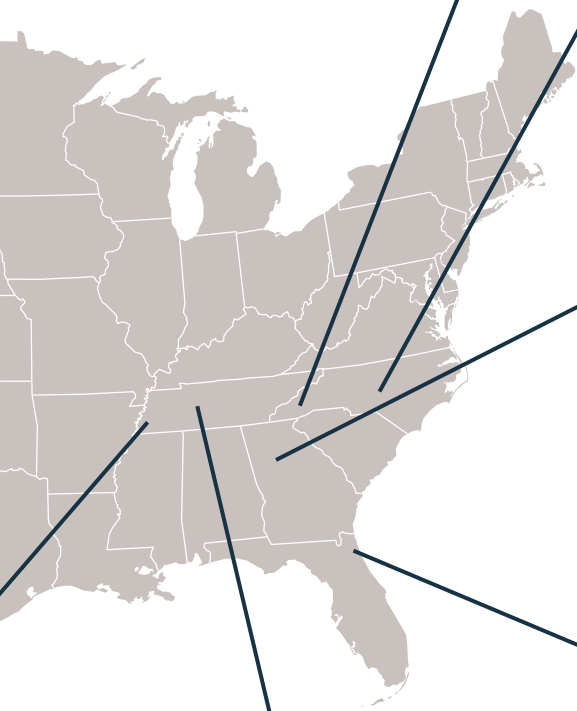
MANCOS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH MANCOS, CO

A progressive rural congregation that has become a sanctuary of healing, honesty, and spiritual grounding through courageous love and deep connection to place.

TRINITY UMC MEMPHIS, TN

A justice-oriented, affirming congregation that draws from its historic tradition while it opens paths for courageous inclusion and deep community engagement





BRYSON CITY UMC BRYSON CITY, NC

Situated in small town USA, they are a congregation that invites people to explore and find the fullness of their created identity and to flourish in connection to others.

FIRST UMC OF LIBERTY LIBERTY, NC

A rural intergenerational church that has expanded its vision of congregation to include the whole community.

EASTSIDE CHURCH EAST ATLANTA VILLAGE, GA

A young adult church in an urban setting that offers welcoming space for questioning, belonging and a commitment to creativity and justice together.

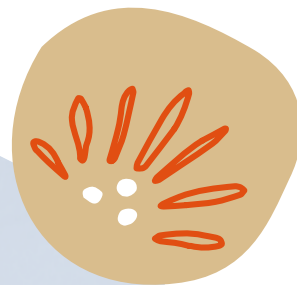
SAN MARCO CHURCH JACKSONVILLE, FL

An urban congregation in an old building filled with the arts, a broad inclusion, and an attentiveness to diversity of all kinds.

GLENDALÉ UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NASHVILLE, TN

An affirming, justice-oriented congregation that takes courageous public witness seriously.

AFFIRMATION OF THE GIFTS OF SMALL



Small churches are a countercultural testament to a society that demands ‘more’ and ‘bigger’. Like the surprising plant in Jesus’ parable—the one that grows from a tiny mustard seed—flourishing small churches confound our expectations. They don’t grow tall, but their tenacity allows them to fill a landscape. They are home to people who might never get comfortable under a tall steeple. Here scarce resources are multiplied into abundant ministry through lay and clergy leadership that is creative, adaptable and nimble. Here ‘love your neighbor’ means care and connection that come from actually knowing both the person in the next pew and the person who lives down the street. Small churches are places where we see the beauty of the gospel lived out in the lives of real people in real time.

IDENTITY MARKERS OF

Flourishing

Flourishing small churches share a common DNA that allows leadership to flow through trust, proximity, and responsiveness rather than fixed programs or rigid plans. These are the characteristics that create space for growth, risk, and transformation:

Connection

in and beyond congregations; they create trust and make impact by forming deep partnerships.

Relationships

are central, not supplemental. Intimacy, proximity, humanity are critical to decision-making and action. These relationships cannot be rushed or manufactured.

Lay people

share ownership and clear roles, and bear real power and responsibility.

Nimbleness

demonstrated through adaptability and flexibility, responding quickly to changing needs and opportunities.

Context matters

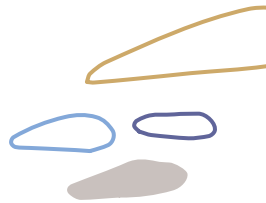
to small churches that reside with particular people, in a particular place; they discover their purpose, mission, and strength in that particularity.

CLARITY OF IDENTITY

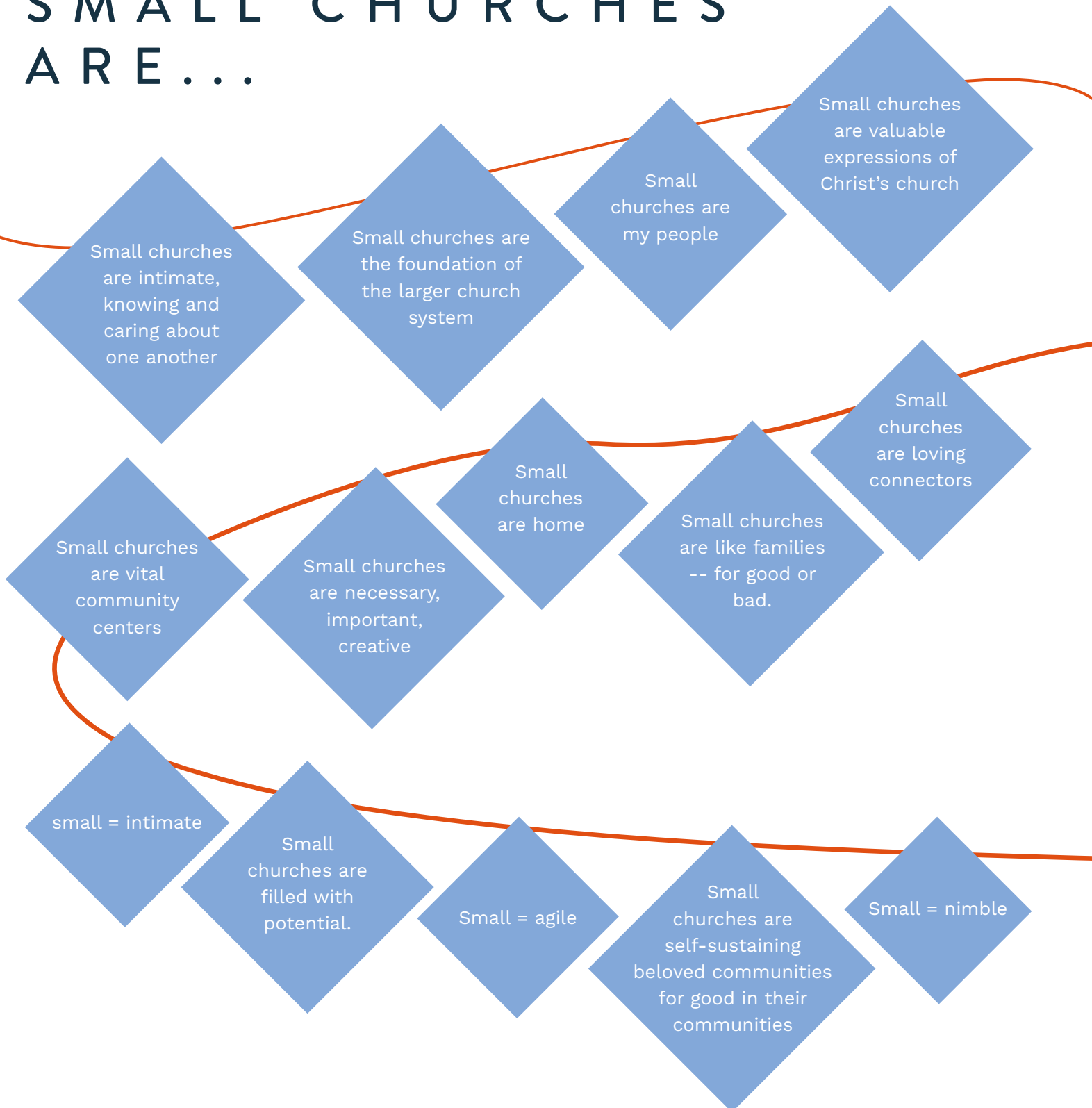
From our first gathering with this cohort, we saw a clear through-line in their stories. Each of these congregations had *something*—a story, a value, some commitment—that expresses their particular identity. That essential identity shows up again and again—in their community impact work, the way faith is formed and reinforced, their sense of calling to the work of ministry. Lay leaders and clergy both expressed it, remarkably similarly. Even when they could not articulate it in theological language, they know who they are in a way that allows them freedom from the burden of trying to be everything to everyone. It empowers consistency in the ways they show up, and in knowing what part of God's work is theirs to do. It's reflected in their language, their rituals, their space. It gives them energy, clarity and focus. When it comes to this work, there is a way even when resources are scarce. Loaves rise, fishes multiply. ~ **Kathleen McShane**

The people of small churches don't always recognize that they are flourishing. The story that they have told themselves reflects the story that they have been told: the aesthetic of vitality is bigger, better, and more. In our first cohort, congregations were hesitant to identify that they were flourishing. There was a resistance to naming themselves as vital and flourishing because they had never been named as such. Over the course of the year, these small congregations began to articulate unique vocations. Their identity was grounded in the particularity of their community, responding to specific people in specific places. When their orientation turned towards being an incarnational presence, they recognized unique vocations. They learned to name those vocations as core to their identity. That identity is core to their understanding of flourishing. ~ **Allen Stanton**

Our Learning Partners were encourage to share what they felt was most unique about small church communities.



FLOURISHING SMALL CHURCHES ARE...



'Your wisdom belongs here too'

Glendale UMC

A family fostering three children arrived at Glendale overwhelmed and exhausted. Without being asked, a member quietly began coming to their home every week to cook dinner. The family later shared their gratitude, surprised that anyone had noticed their need at all. The congregation didn't organize it, announce it, or celebrate it — someone simply showed up.

San Marco Church

Kinship at San Marco has grown as people learned about one another well enough to anticipate how each person reacts in conflict, humor, or disagreement. Over time, members discovered they could irritate each other, laugh together, disagree, and still gather around the same table — "like a messy family" that stays connected even when it's uncomfortable.

Trinity UMC

We have shifted as an entire congregation from doing the work of being a place of welcome to being a place of belonging. So even people who don't seem like they belong in a specific spot, like an 8 year old in an adult choir, has a place of belonging there. And when you have that place of belonging, it is home. And when you're at home, the people who are there are family.

'From welcome to lived belonging'

THIS IS WHAT FAITHFULNESS LOOKS LIKE

Embodied practices from the lives of these churches

'No pretending, inside or out'

'Vulnerability is safe here'

Nehalem Bay UMC

Nehalem Bay walked away from a very large financial gift when the donor insisted the church publicly define salvation in a more narrowly defined, evangelical way. The decision cost us materially, but we clarified who we were. The congregation chose inclusion over security and refused to become something we were not.

Glendale UMC

During worship, a woman shared openly that she was entering in-person treatment for mental health. Instead of discomfort or silence, the congregation responded with care and recognition. Others later shared that hearing her story gave them courage to name their own struggles. Vulnerability reshaped what "normal" looks like in worship.

Eastside UMC

You can't sidestep someone forever in a little bitty church, you're going to end up side by side making coffee one morning one way or another. This is authenticity through unavoidable human connection rather than performative inclusion.

Kinship

Authenticity

Bryson City UMC

A young man walked into Restoration House with no job (but a hope for one) and requested \$200 to help with rent. A couple months later, he returned to Restoration House with \$250 to donate to others since he had been helped when in need. Congregation members overhear folks in the grocery store advising people to go to Restoration House for help with life. It has become a beacon of love in our community.

Trinity UMC

A casual pre-worship comment — “We could turn the unused chapel into a food pantry” — became a functioning ministry within weeks. An Eagle Scout adopted it as a project, volunteers stepped forward, and no one shut the idea down for being half-formed. The pantry later evolved as the church experimented with what actually worked.

God revealed in Experience

‘Experience as a source of learning and wisdom’

‘Justice is community getting what’s needed’

Justice

Joseph UMC

Prior to the leadership showing up and representing Joseph UMC at public events people were afraid to show up, demonstrate, or stand in solidarity. And now at every demonstration around justice issues, like immigration, there are numerous folks from Joseph UMC there.

Mancos UMC

The river that runs through town is the river of this church’s life. In 2017, we became a sanctuary church; Rosa lived in the church building for 4 years and 7 months. It was hard. Now I know: I would die for the people in my community. Christianity for us is a practice, a way of life. And it works even for people who don’t come to church.

Liberty

When discussing the opioid treatment RV program, Sandy and Carol were able to, in front of everybody, not anonymously, say: ‘I initially voted against this and here’s my reasons why.’ And through listening and working together, we were able to come to a unanimous consensus of doing it for six months.” This demonstrates the reality that the work of justice is...scary and sometimes it’s not real quick”

Restoration

‘Healing without pretending perfection’
‘We release what grows beyond us’

‘Stillness leads to action’

Trinity UMC

When our new pastor came, we did ministry out of two buildings -- the sanctuary building and the education building. The sanctuary building had lots of deferred maintenance. Sara helped us see that we had to let the sanctuary building go, so we could be freed for joyful obedience in ministry. That was hard for me, but I didn’t fight it. I had to realize it wasn’t about me; it was about what we needed to do to be faithful. We sold the sanctuary.

San Marco Church

A trans woman who had been rejected by her previous faith community arrived at San Marco unsure if she could trust church again. Over time she became active, found belonging, and eventually accepted a leadership position. Her willingness to lead marked not just inclusion, but restoration of faith after deep harm.

SAN MARCO CHURCH

JACKSONVILLE,
FLORIDA

Urban neighborhood of sharp economic contrast

Within a one-mile radius of both great wealth and deep need, San Marco lives its ministry at the intersection of relationship, neighborhood presence, and shared humanity.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

Kinship shows up as shared ownership: people don't come asking permission for ideas, they come ready to help make them happen. Newcomers are trusted, invited into leadership, and encouraged to shape the community — from leading groups to preaching — often discovering gifts they didn't know they had.

Restoration

Restoration at San Marco looks like people reclaiming faith without pressure or shame. By creating space to question authority, doubt inherited beliefs, and speak openly, the church helps people recover “nuggets of pure faith” that disappointment never fully erased.

Experience

Formation at San Marco happens by letting people try things before they are polished or proven. When people arrive with ideas — a life group, a monthly gathering, a new approach to VBS — the default response is “give it a shot.” Some things last, some don't, and that's okay. Experimentation itself is understood as formative, because people often discover their gifts only by doing.

Justice

Justice is embedded in how power is handled: authority is decentralized, voices are trusted, and people are empowered rather than controlled. Formation itself becomes an act of justice when people are freed to participate fully instead of being managed.

Authenticity

San Marco is intentionally a place where questions are welcomed and curiosity is honored. No question is treated as inappropriate, heretical, or off-limits. People are invited to name what they've hated, struggled with, or been disappointed by in faith — trusting that honest questioning is how faith is restored, not destroyed.



TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Midtown urban neighborhood

An affirming and justice-centered congregation, Trinity UMC has committed itself to healing past harms by becoming a reconciling church, celebrating its first same-gender wedding, and serving as a trusted, diverse hub for community life in Midtown Memphis.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

Formation at Trinity is shared: pastors do not carry it alone. Multiple voices teach, lead, and shape learning, giving participants a realistic picture of a diverse, communal faith rather than a single authoritative voice.

Restoration

Young people especially experience restoration by encountering a faith that does not demand certainty. When they are told, “That’s a good question — many people wrestle with it,” they learn that doubt does not disqualify them from belonging.

Experience

At Trinity, formation happens both formally and informally. There are structured spaces — adult Sunday school (in-person and online), Godly Play for children, and a revived youth confirmation class — but faith is also formed through participation: serving in the food pantry, working with Scouts, or showing up in shared ministry.

Justice

Justice is practiced through integration: faith formation is not separated from service. People are formed spiritually while serving — learning justice not as a concept, but as a way of living. Trinity is experimenting with being visibly responsive to matters of injustice in the world in ways that the community can see. In response, the community goes to bat for the church, an atheist Scout parent publicly defended the church online, a sign that justice work is building trust beyond belief.

Authenticity

In Trinity’s confirmation and adult formation spaces, questions are not rushed toward answers. Leaders respond to hard questions by naming their complexity and honoring multiple faithful responses, modeling that faith is not monolithic.



JOSEPH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

JOSEPH, OREGON

Isolated rural town at the edge of wilderness

Once hesitant to engage LGBTQIA+ inclusion, this small, predominantly retired congregation has become a visible sanctuary and trusted partner for marginalized neighbors, embracing courageous hospitality as a defining expression of faith.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

At Joseph UMC, formation happens through deep relational knowing. People don't just worship together; they know one another's stories, struggles, and journeys. Members speak about being inspired by how others have lived through adversity with grace and kindness. Faith is shaped by proximity — by watching, learning from, and wanting to become more like the people around you.

Experience

Experiential formation happens through lived observation rather than structured programming. People grow by seeing faith embodied in others over time — noticing patience, resilience, generosity, and courage in everyday life. Formation is slow, relational, and often invisible, but deeply transformative.

Justice

In a county where 66% voted for Trump and political tension is high, the pastor of Joseph UMC showed up at justice demonstrations wearing a collar. Her presence — and later her speaking — had a surprising effect: it de-escalated tension and signaled that a church cared about justice. Congregants who had never attended a protest before came. Others in the community, including agnostics and atheists, later visited the church simply because they saw a pastor stand publicly for human dignity.

Authenticity

Authenticity shows up quietly, through the trust that allows people to share real life and real struggle within relationships. Faith is not presented as polished or complete, but as something shaped by lived experience. Growth happens because people are known as they are, not as they are expected to be.



GLENDALE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

NASHVILLE,
TENNESSEE

Urban neighborhood in the heart of the city

An affirming and justice-forward congregation, Glendale has grown into a chosen family for many who have been hurt or excluded by the church, embracing experimentation, authenticity, and an abundance mindset that sends people out with love and shows up for one another quietly and faithfully.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

Kinship at Glendale shows up in quiet, often unseen ways. A congregant noticed a foster family overwhelmed by three new children and began preparing dinner for them every week—without being asked. Small, unexpected groups of people form friendships simply because they need community. Kinship also includes adopting new pastors and leaders into an already-formed “chosen family,” even when itinerancy makes that vulnerable.

Restoration

After Pride, Glendale faced harassment, a viral YouTube attack, and eventually a cinder block thrown through a sanctuary window. Instead of responding with anger, a trans member transformed the cinder block into art—painted with Pride colors, a BLM fist, and the UMC flame. The church chose forgiveness over retaliation, reclaiming harm as witness. Restoration also shows up in welcoming people long wounded by churches back into sacred space.

Experience

Glendale embraced large, rapid changes all at once—especially around inclusion—rather than slow incremental shifts. They lost some members over inclusive welcome statements and banners, but those losses opened space for others. Much of their justice and formation work happens “on the fly”: responding to crises, experimenting publicly, and seeing how the Spirit moves through action rather than planning.

Justice

Justice at Glendale is visible, embodied, and risky. Pride presence, banners, public signs, marches, and protests are all part of congregational life. The church accepts backlash as part of discipleship. Justice is seen not just in events, but in sustained, inclusive posture.

Authenticity

Authenticity is embodied in shared vulnerability. People openly name mental health treatment, addiction recovery, and fear during worship. A woman sharing she had been sober for one week was seen as deeply courageous. Online worship accurately reflects who Glendale is, so newcomers who attend virtually for months find the same church when they finally walk in. Authenticity is measured by consistency across platforms and moments.



BRYSON CITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

BRYSON CITY,
NORTH CAROLINA

Small rural town at the edge of the Smoky Mountains

A deeply rooted, service-oriented congregation, BCUMC expresses its faith through “love in action,” partnering across the community to address poverty, addiction, creation care, and belonging while inviting people to bring their whole selves into God’s healing work.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

“Yes—when do you want to start?” A man in long-term recovery asked to start an AA group; the church immediately made space, giving the fellowship hall freely—treating his wisdom as a gift to the community Platform for others’ call. People hear the church is open, show up, and are empowered to lead what they’re carrying.

Restoration

Restoration House. They birthed a restorative ministry/ nonprofit and then released it to grow beyond the church—“letting go” so it can thrive without being controlled. Space for taboo healing. They took risks hosting groups for people navigating addiction/infidelity/pornography—making room even when it felt uncomfortable.

Experience

Start it, learn it, adapt it. They didn’t over-process the AA group; they began, adjusted, and let experience guide practice. Messy Church started right before COVID and morphed into a Drive-through Church in a Bag with dinner and devotional handed to those with food insecurities.

Justice

MAT RV pilot. They partnered to host a medically assisted treatment RV for opioid addiction—naming fear honestly, then committing to a pilot for the good of neighbors. Creation justice integrity. A church council conversation shifted choices (shirts/materials) toward values-aligned creation care, even at higher cost.

Authenticity

No pretending required. Cole and his family describe it as the first church where they never had to pretend to be anything other than who they are—personally and publicly. Council culture: truth + time. People can name fear, disagreement, and resistance out loud (not anonymously), and the church gives time to process toward consensus.



FIRST UMC OF LIBERTY

LIBERTY, NORTH
CAROLINA

Small, rural town in central North Carolina

A deeply rooted and diverse congregation, Liberty First UMC has rediscovered its purpose by moving from fear of scarcity to a lived theology of abundance, courageously welcoming displaced neighbors and reclaiming its identity as a faithful and hopeful presence in a changing community.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

“We’ve been waiting for you.” After disaffiliation displaced neighbors, Liberty didn’t just say “you can come here”—they made space so people could stay, integrate, and become “at home” in an already-established community. Belonging becomes leadership. Within a year, people who swore off church leadership were serving as trustees and council chairs because Liberty made room for grief, honesty, and re-entry without pressure.

Restoration

Grief held in community. They created time and space to “be mad,” cry, grieve, and unwind—until people could say, “We belong here.” Recovery space is welcome space. They made room for an NA group for a community member’s healing—refusing shame and treating the struggle as something embraced, not hidden.

Experience

Welcoming Wanderers. They created a new, intentional gathering (something they’d never done) to walk with displaced people through grief—beyond condolences, into shared lament and listening.

Justice

Liberty Learning Center. They invest in restoring families and educational futures: family nights, reading support, and practical tools for parents—justice as “right relationship” for the whole community. Justice as slow listening. The literacy work took years of listening, false starts, and iteration—justice pursued without savior fixes.

Authenticity

“Not hiding truth.” After a painful season of subversion/backroom dynamics, Liberty made a conscious choice toward transparency—telling the truth internally and externally, rebuilding trust with the community and conference. Bearing anger honestly. They were willing to sit with others’ raw grief and even anger (“we didn’t like them”) without forcing pleasantness.



EASTSIDE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

EAST ATLANTA VILLAGE,
GEORGIA

Urban neighborhood shaped by grit, engagement, and gentrification

A young, intergenerational congregation where many find a safe re-entry into church life, Eastside offers space to question, wrestle, and grow, making faith feel grounded, authentic, and lived through the practice of transformed life together.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

Kinship at Eastside grows through small, relational spaces—core groups meeting in homes, affinity groups formed around shared identity, and informal theological conversations that spill into everyday life. People belong by participating, studying together, and supporting one another's growth. Connection is built through shared curiosity and trust rather than institutional roles.

Restoration

Restoration is “really connected with resurrection... being made whole.” With many “recovering evangelical” folks: “deconstruction... they don't want to stay there... they want to reconstruct... restore a relationship with God... restoration looks like reconstruction... make faith whole again after you've given up the parts that were harmful.”

Experience

Formation at Eastside happens through lived practice rather than prescribed programs. Theology is explored in homes, affinity groups, and worship planning spaces where people actively engage texts, ideas, and real-life questions. People experiment with faith by leading groups, studying scripture together, and trying out ways of living transformed lives without needing a formal discipleship pathway. Formation emerges through doing, discussing, and reflecting together.

Justice

Justice at Eastside is woven into formation rather than separated from it. Advocacy, healing, and theological reflection are intertwined, especially within LGBTQ affinity groups where formation includes naming harm, practicing inclusion, and imagining more faithful ways of living together. Justice work is not an add-on but part of how faith is formed and lived.

Authenticity

Eastside is shaped by people who refuse to stop at deconstruction and instead pursue reconstruction. Questions, doubt, and deep theological curiosity are not only welcomed but expected. Lay people openly lead conversations about canonization, scripture, and theology, bringing their full selves—including skepticism, scholarship, and lived experience—into the life of the church. Authenticity shows up in honest conversation rather than polished certainty.



NEHALEM BAY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

NEHALEM, OREGON



Rural coastal community

A welcoming, service-oriented congregation with a growing abundance mindset, NBUMC extends care far beyond its walls through expansive outreach, creative use of technology, and a deep commitment to meeting community needs with authenticity, justice, and restoration.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

People arrive early and linger long after worship because they haven't seen one another all week. Care happens organically: rides to doctor's appointments, meals dropped off, visits made without being asked. The congregation does much of what larger churches assign to staff — because they belong to one another.

Restoration

Leaders explicitly named restoration not only as individual healing, but as repairing the broader perception of the church as unsafe or harmful. Community dinners became a neutral, trusted space where LGBTQIA+ neighbors found safety and eventually became core leaders — even without attending worship. That, too, was named as church.

Experience

When the pandemic shut down in-person worship, Nehalem Bay UMC moved to Zoom out of necessity. When restrictions lifted, they made a deliberate choice not to return to "normal." Zoom stayed — so seasonal members living in Delaware, people in assisted care hours away, and those physically unable to attend could still fully belong. The experiment became a practice of inclusion rather than a stopgap.

Justice

NBUMC noticed that the local food bank — though well-intentioned — was only open two hours one weekday afternoon, a time when many food-insecure neighbors working multiple part-time jobs simply could not come. So the church made a different choice: their food pantry, clothing bank, and pet haven are open four days a week, structured around the schedules of those who need help.

Authenticity

After receiving an unexpected \$1,000 gift, church leaders followed up with the donor — only to discover that the larger gift he and his wife wanted to give came with conditions. They wanted the outreach ministry to function as explicit evangelism, with expectations around salvation language and conversion. NBUMC declined the gift, choosing alignment over financial security.

MANCOS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

MANCOS, COLORADO



Rural Four Corners community near Mesa Verde

A long-rooted, progressive congregation, Mancos UMC offers a spacious and spiritually grounded home for those seeking healing, honesty, and belonging, embracing faithful courage, clear boundaries, and deep connection to place, nature, and one another.

STORIES FROM OUR CHURCH

Kinship

“In that smaller community... we start off with kinship... developing those relationships... not only within the walls... but in the community... once we develop trust... people share their doubts and fears.” And: “walking around town... people have a deep desire... they might use different words for God... part of something bigger that cares.”

Restoration

“Folks... disaffected from other places... disillusioned... feel restored.” And the pastoral/communal healing tone: “cheaper than counseling”... “accepting our imperfection”... “hold each other up.”

Experience

“Being small, experimenting... we switched to two services... then Covid... flipped quick to online... then outdoors... then back to one... regrow our youth... you want to try it, let’s try it... be honest if it’s not working.”

Justice

A pivot from kinship to advocacy: “now that I know some of these people better... I want to advocate for them... if the world out there is still the same... maybe the next step is how do we push back... in a grace and love filled way... partnering with groups... I need to be at city council... school board... protests... because it’s the people that I care about now.”

Authenticity

“We’re very upfront about who we are... pride flags, trans flags, BLM... slides... in case someone wants to leave.” A visitor watched the slides “after a full rotation... he just got up and left.” It made him sad, but also: “I’m glad we’re comfortable enough with who we are to say who we are... so he wouldn’t... have a really negative experience.”



“
Small Churches are
seeds of hope planted
in the community.”

FORMING FAITH

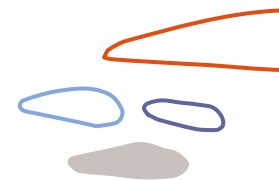
We began this cohort with a hypothesis: that what distinguishes flourishing small churches from others, and from all the other organizations that engage in community impact is that these churches are ‘small cells of deep formation’.

In our first cohort gathering, we noticed (with some dismay) that these local congregation leaders did not speak of faith formation in the ways we were looking for it. They did not call attention to discipleship programs, or regular prayer circles, or classes on the Wesleyan theological tradition.

In our discussions over the year, we came back to the topic of spiritual formation again and again. We asked, ‘One year into their involvement, what will have changed for a new member or attender of your church?’ The responses were revealing.

- They have some sense that they’ve impacted someone else’s journey of faith
- They’ll have had the opportunity to ask a lot of questions
- They’ll know: “Nothing you do can get between you and God’s love”
- They will feel that they are seen
- They’ll have gotten involved in doing good in the larger community
- They’ll be kinder





When they spoke about leadership, and skinny church budgets, and the partnerships they make for community impact, it was clear that Christian faith and values flavor everything these church leaders do. They said things like:

- We have a woman who's mobility-challenged and can't drive. Getting her to church has been a challenge. Working that out together—trying solutions, adjusting, trying again—has been its own kind of formation: “How do we love each other well?” It's kindness and belovedness—respecting people for who they are, not who we need them to be. That kind of love is transformative, period.
- There's something you can feel when you walk in. People say, “This feels different here.” The energy is different. I've served churches where we sang “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” and there was no sweet spirit. Here, people walk in and they feel it.
- We have people in our congregation who live in a way that makes the rest of us say: ‘I want to be like them.’
- We follow a God who teaches us about the upside-down kingdom.
- Every conversation we have about the church's finances is spiritual and practical both. It's about holding on to hope, trusting in the abundance of God.

Their words speak of an internalized and enacted faith, even though it is not always articulated or formed in traditional language and methods. Faith formation happens in these small churches differently: in friendships that invite open questions and uncertain answers, in the way they share and serve meals, in the way they invite and applaud a child who plays the trombone in worship long before he's an excellent musician.

Classes and formal discipleship programs aren't the carriers of spiritual formation in these congregations; the way they live together is.

We have no doubt that these churches are changing lives. They are flourishing in significant ways: their welcoming spirit, their concern for neighbor, their kinship with one another. And still, we wonder:

Is there enough attention being paid to a disciplined and intentional transmission of faith?

Can churches like these welcome and genuinely accept the people they meet and serve and also speak of Christian identity as an imperative toward personal transformation?

These are the same questions that engage, and sometimes trouble, the Church as a whole in these days. Perhaps small churches are our places of wisdom and experimentation, as we learn to adapt traditional modes of faith formation to meet new people in a new time.

LEADERSHIP

What we saw

At the beginning of this project, we assumed there might be a common set of skills or traits that defined leaders of thriving small churches. Perhaps there was a recognizable “type” — a personality, a strategy, a playbook.

As early as our first gathering, that assumption dissolved.

These leaders shared little in common in terms of style, background, or temperament. What they shared instead was an **attentiveness to context** and a **commitment to mutuality**. Leadership in these congregations is not concentrated or top-down. It is distributed, relational, and adaptive.

Across these churches, leadership belongs to the whole body.

Pastors are not expected to shoulder every responsibility. Lay leaders are not helpers waiting to be invited from the sidelines. Trustees handle facilities. Committees make decisions. Informal conversations resolve issues before meetings are ever called. Sometimes this distributed leadership creates communication gaps — pastors occasionally learn about decisions after the fact. Yet even this tension reflects something important: the church is not dependent on one person.

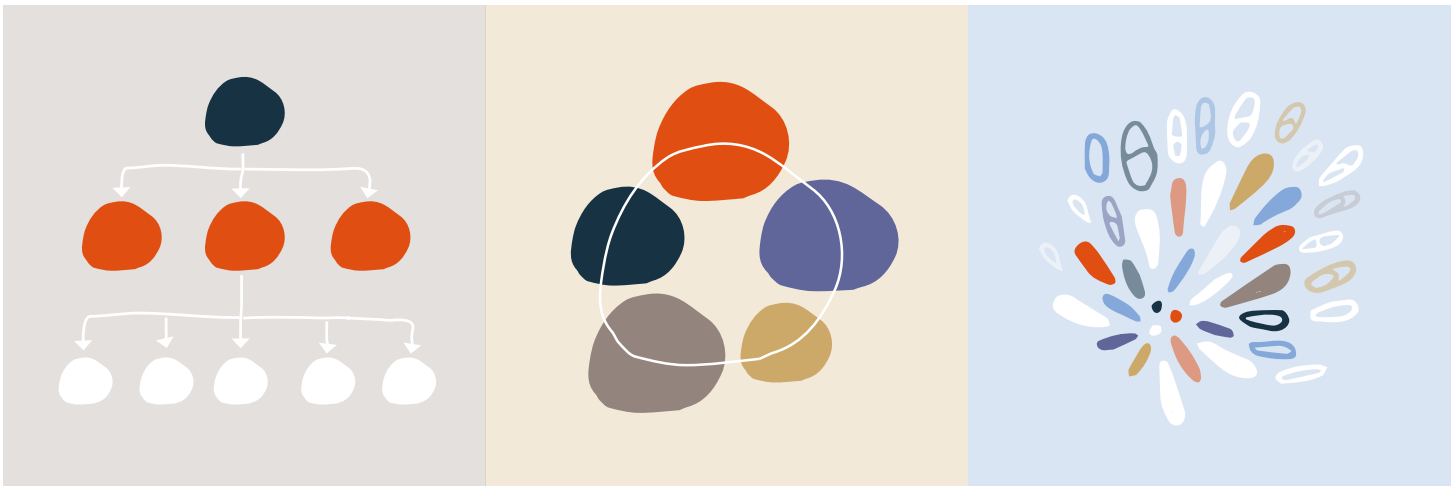
Context matters

Urban congregations navigate commuter schedules and limited volunteer time. Rural churches rely on long-standing relationships and deep community presence. Leadership must fit the ecology of the place. Flourishing leadership is less a rigid structure and more a relational dance.

We noticed a kind of alchemy at work in these churches. It is neither the heroic excellence of a take-charge pastor nor a singularly gifted lay team. Instead, something happens between a pastor who is deeply present and a congregation that feels known and valued. There is mutual trust. Neither is using the other as a stepping stone. The difference is palpable: a synergy that is un-anxious and shared.

Leadership here is gift-based and contextual. It emerges from trust, not title. It is sustained by encouragement, adaptability, and the courage to let ministries end when their season is complete. Leaders matter deeply in small churches. Many congregations carry stories of misaligned appointments or misconduct that left wounds. When leadership fits — relationally and contextually — congregations flourish. When it does not, the harm lingers.

What distinguishes thriving small churches is not a leadership formula. It is a shared understanding that the gifts of each person are necessary — recognized, offered, and celebrated for the good of the whole.



What this means

If this is what flourishing leadership looks like in small churches, then the institutional church must reckon with what it has been rewarding, funding, and preparing leaders to become.

Too often, our systems assume effective leadership is visionary, programmatic, scalable, and centrally managed. We train clergy for complexity and growth, but not always for the slow, relational work of presence. We invest in large models and city-centered innovation while resilient leadership is quietly being formed in rural towns, aging congregations, and overlooked neighborhoods.

These churches remind us that leadership is not primarily about expansion — it is about faithfulness, trust, and relationship. It is about cultivating an ecology where gifts are named, burdens are distributed, and ministry emerges from deep contextual knowledge rather than imported strategy.

The question is not whether small churches can survive. The question is whether the connection will learn from what is already working.

What would it mean to fund relational capital, not just measurable outcomes?

To equip pastors for collaboration rather than performance?

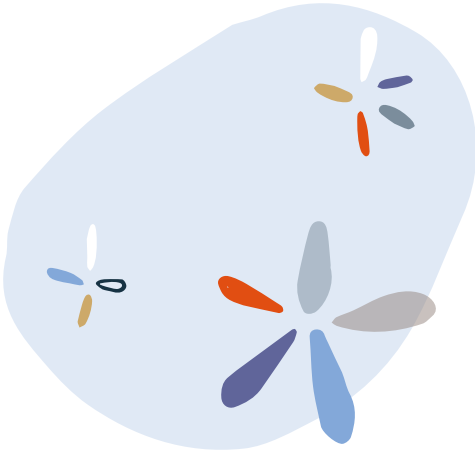
To train leaders for adaptability, improvisation, and the courage to let things end?

To build systems of support that reflect the church we actually have — not the church we wish we still were?

These congregations are not exceptions. They are not smaller versions of larger churches. They are mustard seeds: small, pervasive, and already bearing the kingdom's quiet power in their communities.

If we are willing to see them clearly, they do not simply need our protection. They have something to teach us about what leadership looks like in this moment of the church's life. The future of faithful ministry may depend less on scaling up and more on learning from what is small, resilient, and deeply known in its place.

WHAT ABOUT RESOURCES?



Thoughts from Allen Stanton

There is not one word that captures flourishing small churches approach to resources. But this we saw in all of the churches in this cohort: They are not flourishing because they have abundant resources. At times, small churches view their lack of resources as a leverage for creativity. New missions, community partnerships, and increased lay leadership are possible because their limited resources foster creativity.

But it is dangerous to imply that small churches are flourishing because they lack resources. The story of success in The United Methodist Church often overlooks the informal and relational work that happens in the small membership church, instead focusing on the larger programs that require staffing and funding. There is often frustration and embarrassment that congregations need to take special offerings just to pay their pastor living wages. One congregation recognized a need to collect a “thirteenth month” of offerings at the end of the year in order to ensure payroll and apportionments.

It is most fair to say that flourishing small churches are flourishing in spite of their limited resources. It is a testament to their faithfulness that they assume manna in the desert. It is a testament to that faithfulness, as well, that the churches in our cohort prioritized apportionments.

Though apportionments represented a significant burden for many of these congregations, and though congregations frequently felt that the system’s leadership did not fully recognize their situation, they continue to support the connectional work of their denomination.

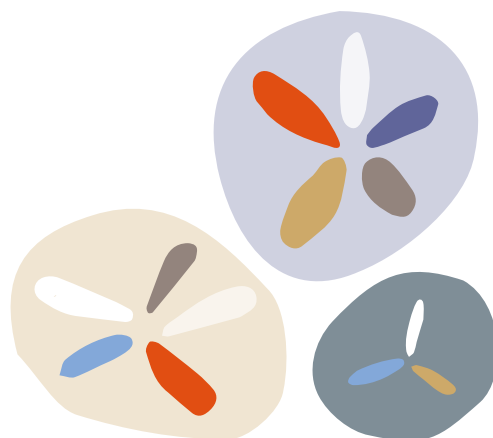
Thoughts from Kathleen McShane

Flourishing small churches are accustomed to pursuing ministries with scarce resources. They create new ministries from almost nothing in their hands. They regularly practice laying aside their fears when the budget comes up short. They learn to collaborate with other organizations that complement their strengths and fill in their gaps. Congregational leaders encourage one another to creativity and resourcefulness, to greater trust in God and in one another. They develop over time a confidence that looks, from the outside, like fearlessness.

And yet... as we pursued these conversations into their depth, we heard from church leaders that there is a long-term, soul-wearying cost that comes with doing ministry on a shoestring. A number of pastors confessed that their compensation packages are barely adequate to meet their families' housing needs or their student loan debt. Lay leaders expressed shame that their congregations cannot afford to compensate their pastors adequately. These were the most tense discussions of our gatherings, and the most intensely personal.

In our connectional United Methodist system, we intend to honor ministry in every context. But comparisons are inevitable. Every clergy member knows that the path to fuller compensation is to climb to leadership of larger and larger congregations. This is a system that borrows far more heavily from capitalist culture than it does from our theology. The consequence of the system we have now—felt especially in small churches—is that few people can *afford* to be pastors unless they have financial support from a spouse, or a retirement plan, or previously-acquired assets. Without conscious intervention, ministry will become, increasingly, a luxury profession.

If we want to encourage clergypersons to pastor with confidence and joy, in whatever place they are called to serve the church and its community, we will have to adjust the financial model that steers most local churches and address the inequities built into our systems of deploying leaders.



5 CRITICAL QUESTIONS

In 2018, church consultant Tom Bandy predicted that by 2025, the church growth model that many of us internalized in the 1990's would fade out of use. He said this before the Covid pandemic that only accelerated that decline. We all know, in our bones, that increases in membership, attendance, even baptisms, are no longer the best way to measure the vitality of churches. But we've been slow to find the next meaningful measurements of life and impact.

We offer the questions that have emerged from this work with flourishing small churches to the whole body of conversations and work that is before us.

1 Are we training and supporting leaders for the church we actually have?

Ministry is significantly different in these churches than it is in larger churches. They are not simply small big churches. There is a need to reshape how leaders are trained and to discern what they actually need in order to collaborate with both their laity and community partners. Training should prioritize adaptability, shared leadership, and sustainable practice — not aspirational models built for scale. Reorganizing the connection around affinity, common contexts and practices would allow leaders to learn from one another, access relevant support, and be equipped for faithful ministry in the church that exists now.

2 What is made possible because of small, local reservoirs of trust?

Small flourishing churches have earned trust in their communities over time — trust that opens doors institutions often cannot access. They are not outliers or stepping stones; they are essential witnesses to faithful, contextual ministry in this moment. Because they are trusted, these churches carry tremendous relational capital. Partnership, public witness, and courageous engagement are not only possible; they are already taking shape in these communities.

3 How are we leveraging financial and structural support?

Flourishing is difficult to sustain when pastors and congregations are expected to lead courageously without equitable compensation or adequate institutional support. Financial models, appointment structures, and workload assumptions must change if we expect this kind of ministry to endure.

4 Where is innovation most likely to take hold?

Innovation dollars are often invested in large, urban, or highly visible projects rather than in small churches where adaptive practices are already part of organizational life. What if our next experiments in innovation focus on these settings, where scale and proximity to power are less important than the identity markers described in this report?

5 What can small churches teach us?

What is emerging in a post-pandemic, post-2024 landscape is something new, something worthy of a long, steady, affirming gaze. These churches reveal that flourishing is not a formula or a growth strategy, but a lived reality shaped by context, trust, and shared responsibility. Perhaps the church we are becoming is already visible, in some surprising places.

A B L E S S I N G

THE GOOD FROM
NAZARETH

**“Can anything
good come from
Nazareth?”**

“Come and see”

Small unremarkable village
after John O'Donohue

We give you thanks, O God ...

For vibrant – flourishing – small churches,
For flexible, dynamic,
Quickly changing yet deeply rooted outposts of grace –
For authentic and connected communities
Marked by the laughter and play of children
The wisdom of elders and saints gone before,
The sounds of service and sharing,
Where trust, love, passion and authenticity
surround our people as they pursue their callings,
bring their joys, share their struggles,
invest in their own growth and
find ways to embody God's love.

We give you thanks
For intimate and authentic ...
different, sometimes difficult,
misunderstood, sometimes dismissed-as-irrelevant churches
that are nonetheless essential to the wellbeing of their towns.
That invite neighbors together with creativity and intention,
That celebrate our individual dignity in the midst of our
great diversity,
That march for justice, work for peace,
House the homeless, sponsor recovery groups,
Offer the welcome of sanctuary;
Break the bread; pour the wine;
Pray the prayers and keep the faith.
That tend the soil, capture the sun, care for all of creation,
That bring a bit of heaven to earth,
Where people who never thought they were “church people”
find and take their place.

For the potential, possibility, and promise of our places
Too often bottled up and frozen by fear,
Silenced by stories of big things and big places.
Yet, our collective histories bear out that
Small churches and their leaders
know what it means to survive death and find resurrection.
And through Divine alchemy
mutuality and interdependence in them become kinship.

We give you thanks for this gathering ...
For the welcome and inspiration we have found in each other
– For Austin and Denver and Zoom --
where we have been seen and heard, understood and valued.

For the joy and pride we have found together in being small
And the reminder that -- regardless of everything else -- we matter.
For the confidence and hope we have found for the future of the church
Where growth will be measured in depth
Of experience, stories, and changed lives.
We ask for courage to take our next steps –
To walk in faith and faithfully live into our church's mission and vision,
To keep hope alive, to build and deepen relationships in our communities,
To reach out to the unchurched,



To pass on what we have heard and learned –
To Church Council,
To the DS and the bishop, too ...
Committing ourselves to capture and tell the stories of the
good news of small,
To support our churches and the church
To tell our church its value
To offer calm and joy to the world.
The work ahead may at times be tedious
But we believe that this is the work Jesus was about.
Bless us, we pray.
In us, let the whole world see and know
that things which have been cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old
are being made new,
and that all things are being made perfect in love
through the scheming of the Spirit.
Thanks be to you, O God!



**WESLEYAN
IMPACT
PARTNERS**
IGNITING IMAGINATION



**TEXAS
METHODIST
FOUNDATION**
STEWARDING POTENTIAL