

Flourishing

SMALL CHURCHES

COHORT CURRICULUM



PRESENTED BY



**WESLEYAN
IMPACT
PARTNERS**
IGNITING IMAGINATION



**TEXAS
METHODIST
FOUNDATION**
STEWARDED POTENTIAL

OVERVIEW

The ideal cohort will include 7-10 congregations. Cohort participants will be one pastor and one layperson from each congregation

Goals and Hoped-For Outcomes

- Affirm and describe the essential work of small church ministry
- Articulate alternative, non-numerical measures of effectiveness and impact
- Identify pastoral, leadership, and congregational qualities that characterize purposeful, impactful, and effective small congregations
- Explore alternative and sustainable financial and business models
- Articulate the value of faith communities that are small by design

Animating Questions and Themes

- Is there a common small church culture?
- Do our structures facilitate and reinforce the gifts that small churches bring — to people and to the Church as a whole?
- Relationality and intimacy as essential to every aspect of ministry and life together
- What does leadership look like in a small church? How is it distinctive? What are pastor/lay expectations of each other?
- Faith formation: how is it happening? How might it happen more intentionally and effectively?
- The importance of partnerships and collaborations
- Metrics: how do we measure what matters?

Facilitator Note:

Small strawberries have far more flavor than big ones. Keep this image in mind as a recurring metaphor throughout the cohort.

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Materials

Wesleyan Impact
Partners' Flourishing
Small Churches report

Prepare a monthly
gathering agenda
handout for
participants

Create a Parking Lot:
a visible list for
capturing topics to
revisit in later sessions

Recommended Pre-Reading for Facilitators

Review the Flourishing Small
Church Report from
Wesleyan Impact Partners

Read The Gift of Small
by Allen Stanton
(for presentation to the
group)

Other Recommended Resources

How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at Religious Services — Pew Research Center

3 Advantages of Small Churches — Carey Nieuwhof)

The Demise of the Church Growth Model — Tom Bandy

Kara Root: The Deepest Belonging and Receiving This Life

Closing Ritual

Create a closing litany or ritual for ending every in-person and remote gathering. The following responsive litany, from Pádraig Ó Tuama, may serve as a starting point or model:

May we find the wisdom and the courage we need
God be with us.

May we hear the needs of the people we're with
God be with us.

May we love the life we are given
God be with us.



OPENING GATHERING

Format: In person — ideally two days, one night

Participant Pre-Work

Ask participants to complete the following before the gathering:

Congregational Timeline

Prepare a history of your congregation in the form of a River of Life. Include significant events inside and outside the congregation, and movements in size over time.

Vision Statement

Does your church have one? If so, bring it to the first gathering.

A Small Thing

Each participant brings a small object — something that fits in the palm of a hand — that they treasure.

A Passion Speech

Ask participants to be prepared to talk for 2 minutes on something — anything — they are passionate about.

Session 1

Opening

Place the small things participants have brought in the center of the room. As each person describes their object, name the premise of this cohort: there are things that are more beautiful, valuable, and useful because they are small. (Like strawberries — the small ones are sweeter.)

- Read from Jonathan Tran, Swinging for the Fences
- Share the landscape perspective (page 5 in the Flourishing Small Church Report)

Facilitator Note

Think of the objects in the center as seeds of metaphor — images to tend and return to across the full arc of the cohort.

Introductions

- Passion Speeches: 2 minutes on something — anything — you are passionate about
- Share a moment when you loved your church, and a moment when you were frustrated with your church

Congregational Vision

Separate pastors and lay people for these questions:

- Share your church's vision statement. How was it created?
- How does your vision show up in your life together?
- Do you expect your church to grow? Do you want it to grow?

Session 2

Opening Poem/Prayer: Galway Kinnell,
Saint Francis and the Sow

Presentation: The Gift of Small

Select themes from the following — not all need to be covered:

- **Growth as context:** Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics frames uncontained, continuous growth as a pathology. Our cultural fixation on more and always-upward derives from economic assumptions that don't serve communities of faith, which should instead focus on maturity and mission.
- **Identity:** Small churches know who they are.
- **Structure:** Small churches resemble start-ups — non-hierarchical, organically organized. This is a strength.
- **The single-cell reality:** Everyone exists within one relational circle. This is good for depth, but can make entry harder and limits numerical growth.
- **Pastoral freedom:** When the pastor is not at the organizational center, they are free to do what they do best.
- **Volunteer investment:** Volunteers are committed to the whole, not just "their" program. Donors tend to give more deeply.
- **Relational intensity:** Stronger emotions, more durable relationships.

Strengths of Small

- Nimbleness — faster, more flexible decision-making
- More points of connection with the surrounding community (permeability)
- Safe space for authenticity — though with real costs: vulnerability is expected, there is nowhere to hide
- The pastor knows people's gifts
- Learning — and needing — to forgive
- People can stumble organically into their place in ministry
- Opportunities for newness open more naturally
- Donor commitment is high, though financial margins are often thin
- Downside: vulnerability in succession, gaps in ministry

Congregational Vocation

Vocation is not static — it changes over time and context. It is known through the stories a congregation tells and the practices it keeps.

Stories tell and reinforce:

- What we value
- Why we show up
- Where we see God at work

We reinforce our stories through traditions. Every aspect of life together is a space for practicing what we believe.

Session 3

Learning Journey (Optional)

Visit a place or business that is only able to fulfill its mission by choosing to remain small. Talk with the people who have made that choice.

- Debrief learnings in the full group

Session 4

Deeper Introductions and Congregational Stories

- River of Life presentations
- You were nominated to this cohort because someone else sees your church as flourishing. What does flourishing mean — to you — for your church?
- In what ways is your church flourishing? In what ways is it not? What does success look like for your church? What do others see when they look at you?

Closing Session (Opening Gathering)

Opening Poem/Prayer: Naomi Shihab Nye, [Gate A4](#)

- Why are you here?
- What do you know now that you, and your congregation, need from this experience?





REMOTE GATHERINGS

Format: 9 sessions, 75 minutes each (via video conference)

Sequence: The order of these topics may be adjusted as needed

Facilitator Note: Kitchen Match Rule: In response to any question, a participant may speak for as long as it takes a wooden kitchen match to burn itself out. This keeps sharing vivid and focused

Standard Opening (for Each Remote Gathering)

Begin each remote session with the following:

- Brief re-connection: name, place, congregation
- A check-in question related to the season (see individual sessions below)
- What have you continued to think about or process since our last gathering?
- Has anything shifted in your thinking? Is there something you've noticed your congregation doing well that you hadn't noticed before?

Opening Poem/Prayer: Jeanne Lohmann, *Invocation*

Check-In

- What does your congregation do for Lent (or another meaningful liturgical season or holiday)? Is there a practice that is particularly meaningful to you?

Discussion

- How do you know when your church is 'doing it right'? What do you celebrate in your life together?
- How would you measure those things? If you were creating a success metric, what would it track?
- What do you wish your D.S. or Conference asked you about your church? What else do you wish were on the statistical table?

I. Metrics

II. Connections in Your Community

Opening Poem/Prayer: William Stafford,
The Way It Is

Opening Question

- What is your congregation's thread — the line of identity and calling you hold onto no matter what changes?

Discussion: Partnerships

- What outside partners do you work with most regularly? Who works with you?
- What does your church add to joint efforts? What do partners add to yours?

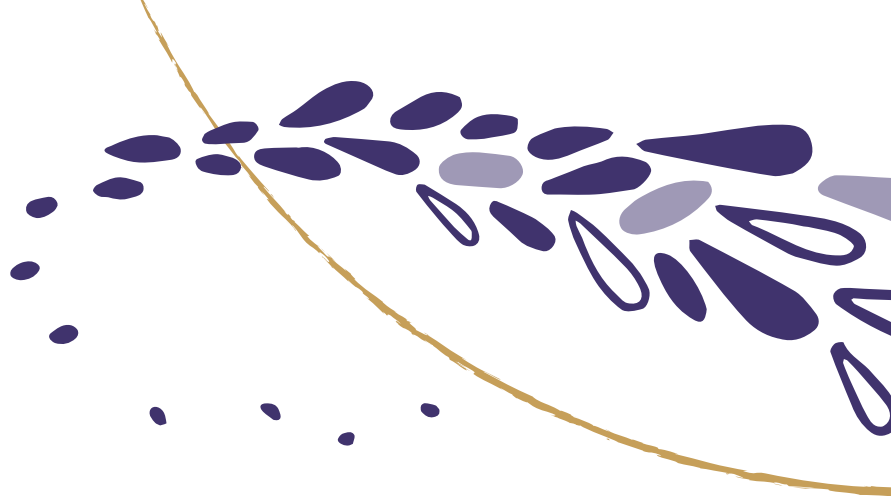
Facilitator Frame

Partnerships in the community help people re-think their impressions of Christianity. Small churches have assets others need:

- Space that allows for short-term collaborations
- People — volunteers
- Communication and publicity platforms
- The credibility and relational authority of the pastor in the community

Nimbleness characterizes these relationships. In small congregations, connections and collaborations often happen without formal action — pastors and lay people both feel empowered to say 'yes' on behalf of the church. This freedom can sometimes feel like a problem.

Facilitator Note: Question to surface for later: When there are leadership transitions, how can a congregation hold the relationships a departing pastor has built and held?



III. Financial Sustainability and Resources

Opening Poem/Prayer: Wendell Berry, *A Vision*

Check-In

- What does the coming season mean for your community? What accelerates at this time of year? What eases — in the church, or for you personally?

Breakout Rooms (5–7 minutes, in congregational pairs)

- What are your congregation's sources of income (by percentage)? How have they changed over time? Does this mix seem sustainable? Over how long?

Full Group Discussion

Choose the most appropriate questions for your group:

- How often do you think about the big picture of your church's finances?
- In your congregation's conversations about money, who speaks the language of abundance? Who speaks the language of scarcity? How do those conversations usually come out?
- What are the reminders of faithfulness you bring to these conversations?
- Have you tried to generate income in other ways? Do you have a long-term strategy?
- Is it faithful — or unfaithful — to talk about a business plan for a church?
- Have you gone through the exercise of dramatically decreasing expenses? If so, how did your congregation manage that?
- What makes you feel confident? What makes you afraid?
- Are your finances consistent with the other ways your congregation is flourishing? How does your financial picture affect the life of your community?



IV. Property, Buildings, and Facilities

Opening Poem/Prayer: Wendell Berry, *A Vision*

Facilitator Note: This session may use the same Wendell Berry poem as Session III, or you may substitute another as appropriate.

Breakout Rooms (8–10 minutes, in congregational pairs)

- Divide a week into 21 time slots (morning, afternoon, and evening for each day). In how many of those slots is your property used for something other than staffing purposes?
- What are those uses? How are they — or aren't they — related to income? To the church's mission?
- Do you distinguish between 'partners' and 'tenants' among those who use your space?

Full Group

Each team summarizes their discussion (use chat for brief responses), then:

- How urgent and important are property and income issues for your congregation? For you as a leader?
- How do you make decisions about these things?
- How are small churches different from larger churches in navigating property and income realities?
- Who gets your reality? Who doesn't?
- Who or what offers you good resources or help?

V. Leadership: Structure, Pastoral and Lay

Opening Poem/Prayer: Kei Miller, *Book of Genesis*

Facilitator Frame

- Present the leadership patterns in small churches. Ask: Is this pattern evident in your church?

Breakout (5 minutes, in congregational pairs)

- Who are the leaders in your church? Are they in formal positions? If not, who are they? How did they come to have power or authority?

Full Group Discussion (15 minutes)

- How do decisions get made in your church — the actual story, not the official one?
- Who starts the process? Who has final approval? How does a decision get implemented?
- How is leadership in your small church different from — or similar to — leadership in other settings?

Breakout by Role (20 minutes)

Two groups: one for pastors, one for lay leaders.

For Pastors:

- What previous experiences of leadership best prepared you to lead this congregation?
- What leadership quality does this church require — or call forth — from you?
- Why did you choose the person who is with you in this cohort?
- What does this church require of lay leaders?

For Lay Leaders:

- How does someone find their way into lay leadership in your congregation?
- What previous experiences — vocational or personal — do you draw on in your leadership?
- What leadership quality does this church require — or call forth — from you?

Opening Poem/Prayer: Stephen Dunn, *At the Smithville Methodist Church*

Check-In

- Tell a 2-minute story about a meaningful Sunday worship experience at your church.
- Tell a 1-minute story about a Sunday when everything fell apart.



VI. Worship

Discussion

- How are your worship services authentic to your congregation? How would you describe them?
- Are there parts that cannot be changed? What are they?
- Who works on the planning of worship?
- What happens when something does not go according to plan?
- What is essential to worship for you?
- How do you structure prayers and invitations to prayer concerns?

Opening Poem/Prayer: St. Irenaeus, *Capable Flesh* (adapted and translated by Scott Cairns)

Facilitator Frame

Clarify terms. Open with a brief framing of what you mean by 'formation' before moving into discussion.



VII. Formation

Discussion

- What does formation look like? What do we mean when we talk about it?
- What does a visitor know — after one visit — about what your congregation believes?
- How does engagement in your church shape or reshape people?
- How do you talk about your work in theological terms? What theological language or frames do you use for what your church does?
- Do members of your congregation have a sense of who you are trying to form people to be?

Opening Poem/Prayer: Rumi, *The Guest House*

Facilitator Frame

Introduce the distinction between adaptive and technical leadership challenges, and between two kinds of organizational work:

Improving

Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of what already exists — usually to overcome obstacles to your existing mission.

Creating

Inventing what does not yet exist — usually to liberate your mission, capture new energy, and attract wider engagement

VIII. Adaptive Challenges and Change

Discussion

- Can you see both kinds of work in your context? Are you clear about what is improvement and what is creation?
- Where do you spend most of your energy?
- Has disruption been part of your congregation's path to change? How has it happened? Who has brought it? How did you respond?
- How did you learn how to adapt in these ways?
- Do members of your congregation have a sense of who you are trying to form people to be?

Facilitator Note: For reflection: Have these churches done some or all of this work intuitively? Do flourishing churches know these things before someone comes to teach them?

IX. Vocation and Identity

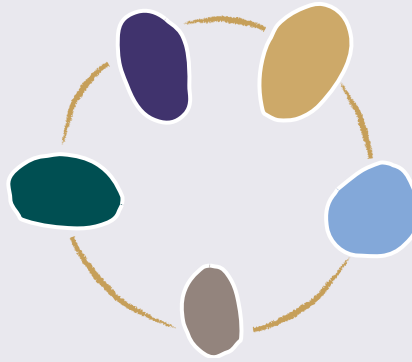
Opening Poem/Prayer: Andru DeFeye, *Enough*

Facilitator Frame

- **Vocation** is the particular set of practices or actions your church is called to do — the ones so natural to this congregation that they reveal, rather than bring, the image of God in this place.
- **Identity** comes from living out that vocation: What does it look like when this congregation is using its gifts for the flourishing of individuals and the whole community?

Discussion

- What is the particular vocation of your church?
- Think back over the last year. Where have you seen your congregation best living out its vocation?
- What do you find most lovely about your church and its vocation?
- What are the pain points in living out your vocation?
- What are the moments in your congregation's life when you sense real joy?
- How do you talk about the identity of your congregation? What would your church members say? What would your neighbors say?



CLOSING GATHERING

Format: In person if possible — three hours plus a shared meal

Opening Poem/Prayer: Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A4*
— Consider following this poem with communion, perhaps using powdered sugar cookies as bread.

Reflection and Integration

- What's changed in your thinking over the course of this cohort?
- Is there anything you look at differently in your church now?
- How has this cohort engagement changed you, or your church?

Defining Flourishing

- How should we define flourishing?
- How would we measure success in a small church like yours?

Letters

- **Pastors:** Write a letter to an incoming pastor of your church. What should they know? What should they do to understand and appreciate this congregation?
- **Lay Leaders:** Write a letter to someone who has visited your church a few times and who appears ready to stay. What can they expect? How are they likely to change as a result of being part of this congregation?

Closing Benediction

Adapted from Kara Root, *Receiving This Life*:

May you know yourself to be held in God's love.
No matter what and always,
may you know the world — and your church — belong to God.
May you trust this.
And when you forget,
may you be still and let God show you.

May you live alongside others,
confessing brokenness,
embracing forgiveness,
upholding each other in weakness,
and bearing death together.

May you watch for God's surprises,
share stories of resurrection,
abide in Christ's love,
and wait for the Spirit to lead you to what is next;
and when that happens,
may you act.

May you sing the brave song,
and from time to time,
stop,
be silent,
and bear witness to the wonder of this life.

May you bless this weary world,
and your fellow travelers in it.
May you bless, and bless, and bless.

May you sense God's delight in you,
and with joy,
may you receive this life.

Amen

This curriculum has been developed as part of the *Flourishing Small Church* Initiative at Wesleyan Impact Partners. We would be grateful if facilitators would share with us your observations and learnings, as well as feedback on any aspect of this cohort curriculum.

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