
LAKE SIDE CHURCH of Chicago

†transforming lives †transforming our world for Christ

The **LAMPLIGHTER**



Rev Stan Wiedeman, Sr Pastor Rev Dave Uchizono, Assoc Pastor Rev Mitsuo Suzuki, Japanese-Speaking Pastor
3939 W Howard St, Skokie IL 60076 Ph: 847.763.9720 Website: www.lakesidechurchofchicago.org Email: lakesidechurchofchicago@yahoo.com

November 28, 2011

THE SMALL CHURCH ADVANTAGE

“We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society ... to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered. ... In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother. ... We may return to our homes and firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.”

Thomas Greene wrote these words in 1829 about the newly built lyceum in New Bedford, MA. New Bedford became one of the world’s leading whaling ports, attracting a diversity of new inhabitants at the turn of the 19th century. The lyceum offered a central location for public gatherings to hear lectures, discuss topics of civic importance and enjoy cultural events that contributed to personal growth.

Greene recognized the common social problem of exclusivism, when people cluster in very small cliques around closely shared interests and experiences. He hoped that the lyceum would expand the sphere of relationships and strengthen the community.

Robert Putnam included this quote in his seminal work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), a sociological study of American communal life. Community in America has suffered the swelling tide of individualism in the last five decades. In general, people are trading communal life for a bloated private life, as they shrink their relational sphere to family and a small group of very close friends.

In his book, *Democracy In America* (1835), Alexis de Toqueville observed the wide range of communal involvement of Americans. He believed the strong relational connections of these voluntary groups would inhibit selfish pursuits that handicap any society. He especially warned against the encroachment of individualism in a democratic society, “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”

The small church (under 250) dispenses an antidote to individualism, providing a lyceum to a diverse gathering of people. A specific set of beliefs draws a permeable perimeter around the church community, creating a form of an exclusive society. But the small church can offer a rich diversity of communal connections in which meaningful relationships form.

The small church wields this advantage over the more conspicuous large church. A megachurch may enjoy a wealth of resources, programs and personnel, but the environment promotes anonymous individualism. Religious consumers benefit from services and programs of exceptional quality, but can easily come and go without personal interactions of any depth.

For example, visitors to Lakeside Church often remark about how long people remain in the sanctuary and hall after a Sunday service, talking with one another. Members of Lakeside value these relationships as important supplements to their worship experience. Biblical fellowship makes as much of a contribution to spiritual growth as studying the Bible, prayer, witnessing and worship.

In most large churches, the building empties quickly following a service. Multiple services contribute to the impersonal climate, requiring one group of congregants to vacate the sanctuary and parking lot so that the next group can attend. Some megachurches have tried to counteract this trend with the addition of coffee and snack shops outside the sanctuary. Unfortunately, many customers order to go, just like they do on Monday morning.

Many megachurches have discovered the importance of small groups to try to create a place for the formation of intimate relationships. Small groups must carefully structure for the fellowship component or they merely become another Bible study or prayer group. Small groups that schedule gatherings in addition to their weekly meetings have begun to discover the real value of community.

The small church also benefits from small groups, but these relationships are enhanced by additional church gatherings. Not only can people maximize the Sunday experience with meaningful relational connections, but they can nurture those relationships at potlucks and other all-church events. Community develops a broader meaning in small churches than large ones.

Small churches should recognize their advantage in the formation of community where we can “learn to know each other more intimately.” It is in these small communities that we can “stir up one another to love and good deeds.” (Hebrews 10:24)

Pastor Stan