Small, Struggling Churches in Europe: Do They Have a Future?

T. J. Marinello

SUMMARY

What is the future for small, struggling churches in Europe whose setting is post-modern, post-Christian and post-Christendom? Is there a place for such gatherings in a time when many believe that bigger is better? The answer is 'yes' if the local church displays effectively the four items to which the first local church was devoted in Acts 2:42; has functioning, local leadership; and struggles due to the local setting rather than to her character.

* * * * * *

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Wie sieht die Zukunft kleiner Gemeinden im Überlebenskampf in einem post-modernen, nach-christlichen Umfeld und Zeitalter in Europa aus? Gibt es Raum für derartige Versammlungen in einer Zeit, in der viele der Auffassung sind, dass größer auch besser bedeutet? Die Antwort ist ein Ja, falls die örtliche Gemeinde auf wirksame Weise die vier Dinge bezeugt, denen sich auch die erste örtliche Gemeinde verschrieben hatte, wie in Apostelgeschichte 2:42 erzählt; zweitens, falls sie eine funktionierende Leiterschaft vor Ort hat; und drittens, wenn ihre Schwierigkeiten eher auf die ört-

* * * * * *

RÉSUMÉ

Quel avenir est possible pour de petites Églises qui mènent leur combat en Europe, dans un contexte post-moderne, post-chrétien et post-chrétienté ? De telles communautés ont-elles une place à une époque où beaucoup considèrent que plus on est nombreux, mieux cela vaut. La réponse est positive si l'Église locale pratique les quatre activités auxquelles s'adonnait la première Église locale selon Actes 2.42 ; si la direction d'Église est assurée localement ; et si elle doit mener des combats à cause de sa situation locale dans la société qui l'environne, et non pas

* * * * * *

Specifically, the local church should be characterised by the study of the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the celebration of the Lord's Supper and prayer. She should have recognised, local leadership in accordance with the characteristics found in the New Testament. If struggling to grow, her struggles should be related to persecution and not due to a character which parallels a clubhouse or a chameleon. She should also be characterised by the historical four marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

* * * * * *

lichen Umstände als auf ihr Wesen zurückzuführen sind. Gerade die Ortsgemeinde sollte ohne Schwierigkeiten zeigen können, dass in ihr Apostellehre, Gemeinschaft, Abendmahl und Gebet beheimatet sind. Sie sollte ferner eine anerkannte örtliche Leiterschaft vorweisen in Übereinstimmung mit den Prinzipien des Neuen Testamentes. Wenn sie mit Wachstumsproblemen kämpft, dann sollten ihre Schwierigkeiten auf Verfolgung zurückzuführen sein und nicht auf einen Charakter, der einem Vereinshaus ähnelt oder wechselhaft ist wie die Farben eines Chamäleons. Schliesslich sollte sie sich durch die historischen vier Wesensmerkmals der Kirche auszeichnen: einig, heilig, katholisch und apostolisch.

* * * * * *

à cause de son caractère. Concrètement, l'Église devrait s'appliquer à l'étude de l'enseignement apostolique, à la communion fraternelle, à la célébration de la cène et à la prière. Elle devrait s'être dotée d'une structure locale reconnue pour assurer sa direction, en accord avec les caractéristiques indiquées dans le Nouveau Testament. Si elle doit lutter pour grandir, son combat devrait résulter de la persécution plutôt que de sa ressemblance à un club ou d'une stratégie de caméléon. Elle devrait aussi être caractérisée par les quatre attributs historiques de l'Église : l'unité, la sainteté, la catholicité et l'apostolicité.

* * * * * *

1. Introduction: the context

The context for churches in Europe is one in which native Europeans are post-modern, post-Christian and post-Christendom.[1] Post-modern Europeans to whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ is brought have as their guiding force feelings rather than reason; they base their knowledge on personal experience rather than on scientific investigation; their truth is personal rather than provable; their ultimate goal is societal acceptance; and their most respected authority is the celebrity, whether that celebrity is from the arts, the academy or the sports arena. The post-Christian context is one in which the basic knowledge of the record and teachings of the Christian Bible is unknown and in which there is often hostility to its moral precepts. As cultural critic John O'Sullivan astutely observed in a recent lecture,

> A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten.[2]

Kenneth Minogue has put it even more colourfully:

> In the vast rambling mansion of our civilization, the cobwebbed gothic wing containing our religious imagination is less frequented than previously, but it certainly remains a haunting presence.[3]

Even persons with a veneer of Christian influence have little understanding of their religion.[4] In the Roman Catholic countries of Western Europe, for example, those under sixty have little to do with the Roman Catholic Church other than at the key moments of baptism, wedding and funeral – and even for these numbers are decreasing.[5] In historically Roman Catholic areas like Flanders, for example, even the practice of these significant ritual markers is in steep decline.[6] The context of post-Christendom means that the governmental support for Christian morals and standards, which was a European mainstay since the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century AD, has ended.[7] The overt secularisation of Europe can perhaps best be seen in the decision on 18 June 2004 to adopt a constitution for the European Union which avoids any mention of a link between Christianity and Europe.[8] In fact an overt, virulent hostility was expressed to Pope John Paul II's suggestion that Europe's Christian roots be mentioned in the constitution.[9] Some even stated that the Pope's request 'betray[ed] a failure to understand the logic of the European construction', a thoroughgoing secular construction.[10]

This is the cultural setting of the small churches I want to discuss. Two main questions will be considered first: What size is 'small' and why is a particular local church struggling? Afterwards an answer to the question of the future of small, struggling churches will be offered.

2. What size is 'small'?

The Christian churches in Europe find themselves in an era where bigger is thought to be better; accordingly, the small local church often is stigmatised in modern Western culture. British pastor and author John Benton insightfully writes,

> We live in a society that worships at the shrine of size. We buy our food at 'supermarkets' and 'hyper-markets'. 'Monster' music events are promoted for the young. 'Mega' sales are advertised in department stores. 'Blockbuster' movies appear at our cinemas. In the world's eyes, if something is not big, it does not deserve attention. It is not easy to be upbeat about a church with just a few in the congregation when we live alongside such a cultural bias.[11]

Additionally, among North America's religious exports to Europe have been attitudes associated with the mega church, that is, Protestant churches with over two thousand attendees.[12] While other nations contain churches of thousands of members such as the world's largest, Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, the US mega church displays 'a host of characteristics that create a distinctive worship style and congregational dynamic'.[13] As a prominent European church planting group with churches in thirty cities states,

> our leadership team left Geneva and returned to the United States to gain further insights from churches in America that had been experiencing explosive growth. During that period, our thinking about the church developed, ultimately becoming what we referred to as the high-impact church.'[14]

While the various mega church influences come from both Pentecostal/Charismatic and non-Pentecostal/Charismatic gatherings, all of these church plants have a common style of gathering

which is labour-intensive as well as visually and aurally dynamic. Accordingly, the goal is to grow in size so that this model can be implemented. This and other goals related to size are clearly advocated by the proponents of the mega church and even of the general larger church model.[15]

While sociologists may applaud the 'relevance' of such mega gatherings, is it the goal of the local church according to the New Testament to grow in order to fit such a model? Is the goal of the local church to increase in number in order to function according to a particularly designed but changing cultural pattern? The New Testament seems to answer the question of size neither sociologically nor programmatically. I would rather argue that a church that is true to the New Testament needs to display effectively the four things to which the first local church was devoted in Act 2:42, and that it needs to have functioning, local leadership.

Acts 2:42 records four things to which the local church was devoted as it gathered: the study of the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the celebration of the Lord's Supper and prayer.[16] As Johannes Munck notes, 'This verse describes the special characteristics of the church. The apostles, witnesses to the resurrection, demonstrate what separates them from the other Jews.'[17] And, 'Luke employs *proskarterein*, "hold fast to", to stress the continuous and persistent tenacity of the disciples', thus setting the example for those who would be part of this new entity – the Church – in its local manifestation.[18]

Clearly the newly formed community was 'constituted on the basis of apostolic teaching'.[19] This teaching was neither to be altered nor discarded (1 Tim 1:3; 6:3); it was and is a deposit to be guarded (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14).

> The teaching is the basis of Christian doctrine, built on the words and deeds of Jesus himself, on his instruction of the apostles and those followers who would become his authenticated witnesses.[20]

This doctrine is not an end in itself, however, but 'a means of preserving and fostering the relationship between the assembled congregation and Jesus Christ'. A gathering which is not constituted on Jesus Christ as attested to by the apostles is no church at all.[21] The result of proper devotion to the apostles' teaching becomes evident in the life of the believers, namely, a 'love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith'. (1 Tim 1:5 ESV)[22] Further, being devoted to the apostles' teaching gives the gathered believers the ability to 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints'. (Jude 3-4 ESV)

Second, the believers were committed to the fellowship (koinōnia). This means that they were committed to this distinctly identifiable group which began on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2.[23] No commitment to the fellowship meant and means no visible community. No commitment to the fellowship also means no continual source of both necessary challenge and mutual encouragement (Heb 10:24-25):[24]

> The mutual care the writer of Hebrews commends to his readers simply cannot be sustained unless the believers of the local Christian community are committed to the fellowship, the place of exhortation and encouragement.[25]

Third, the community of believers was committed to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Luke's choice of wording, 'the breaking of bread', parallels the expression used by Paul when he gave instructions to the local church in Corinth (1 Cor 10:16).[26] As former pastor and church-planter John H. Armstrong writes,

> [Believers] have been redeemed through the precious blood of our Messiah, Jesus, yet we are prone to forget his great act of sacrifice. But our Lord understands perfectly well our weakness and thus made provision for us to come again and again to this table so that we do not forget… Almost every Christian, regardless of how they understand the Supper, agrees with this much – Christ instituted it, and the New Testament commands his followers to celebrate it.[27]

Finally, the newly formed community of believers was devoted to prayer. Some draw attention to the definite article in the text ('the prayers' – tais proseuchais) and conclude that these were 'definite prayers uttered in worship', something which was part of the public activity of the local church when it gathered.[28] Perhaps the believers repeatedly prayed the psalms as they gathered because of their 'firm belief that the repetition of the psalms nurtured dispositions that foster prayer'.[29]

This list of four does not limit what the local church *can* do when it gathers, but it lays out four things which it *must* do. The place of gathering, the style of meetings, and even the frequency of some of these practices vary throughout Acts, so this article is not an argument for a particular tradition. I do, however, understand the Bible to say

that a functioning local church must be able to support these four at a minimum in line with the example of the believers after Pentecost. The way in which these four are accomplished should avoid the extremes of rigid traditionalism (whether an ancient or a newly formed one) and of wholesale accommodation to culture. Accordingly, if these four items from Acts 2:42 are evident, a particular local church is not too small.

When the first missionaries were sent out (Acts 13), their purpose was to preach the message of Jesus Christ and then to form local gatherings from those who had responded to the message. A final step in the forming of these local churches was the appointment of recognised leadership (Acts 14:23). So important was the recognition of local church leadership that the apostle Paul specifically left Titus behind on Crete to appoint such leaders. Paul writes that the task of church planting is not complete until this has been accomplished (Tit 1:5)[30] and it is the first command he gives Titus in his letter.[31] The New Testament records both the responsibilities (Acts 20:17, 28-31; 1 Pet 5:1-4) and the necessary godly characteristics of these local leaders (1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9).[32] In fact, some scholars posit this need for godly leadership as a reason behind the memorable command to have the mind of Christ in Philippians 2, a letter which begins by making a distinction between the recognised, local leadership and the other believers in the local body.[33]

The process by which leadership is to be recognised after the time of the apostles is not clearly stated in the New Testament, but the *fact* of recognised leadership, their task and their character qualities are timeless and therefore applicable wherever a local body of believers is formed. Again, as with the question of size, this essay's presentation of the biblical mandate for recognised, local leadership is not advocating a particular type of leadership structure. That said, I posit that the answer to the best type of polity is found in the New Testament.[34]

How small is too small? If a local body of believers cannot adequately support the four practices of Acts 2:42, it is too small, whether it is newly planted or has shrunk in size. Additionally, a local church is too small if it cannot be led by recognised, local leadership due to lack of qualified people.

3. Why does a local church struggle?

To discover the reason why a local church is struggling, we can ask three questions: What is the character of the local church? What is her setting? And what is her shape?

A local church may be characterised primarily by one of three pictures: the clubhouse, the chameleon or the petrol station (fuelling point). The clubhouse type is a local church with an inward-looking perspective. The gathering exists solely to serve the needs of the present attendees. Adaptation of her practices or outreach to the surrounding community or even the primary language of the attendees is not considered important. I once heard the leader of a local church state that although the music in the church was off-putting to visitors, he was committed to 'serving the saints already in attendance' and not changing 'even if it means we dwindle to two or three people'; and, indeed, this church has sharply dwindled as its attendees got older.[35] In another instance, a family who brought visitors from a lower economic class and a different culture was told to not bring them along any more since these were not 'our kind of people'. Also, failure to adapt to the language of the culture into which a migrant church is planted, over time creates a barrier to those from the host country. It also disadvantages the children of the original migrants who were born in the host country.[36] In its most extreme form, the clubhouse type of local church believes that a pattern of meeting from another land and/or another century is equivalent to the biblical mandate and thus suitable for all times and in all places.

The second type of local church is like a chameleon. As the name suggests, this community does all it can to blend in with its historical and cultural milieu. The latest trends and their jargon are always adopted so that the average attendee and even the specialist at times have trouble keeping up with the pace of change. In many cases, the continual repackaging of the gospel message and the forms of local church gathering create an inherent instability. In the worst case, the message and methods of a local church are so similar to the surrounding world that little difference can be seen; instead, the church changes colour and blends in.[37] One of the most lauded models of local church at the turn of the twenty-first century was the seeker sensitive approach used and propagated by Willow Creek Church in Chicago. This model was studied and copied by local church leaders and their churches

around the world. After thirty years, however, the leadership of Willow Creek Church asked for a study, and the outcomes of this research clearly show the shortcomings of its model. The founding pastor, Bill Hybels, notes that he has helped to create and propagate a model of local church which is not sustainable because it does not lead to maturity of faith among the attendees.[38] Less charitable critics of this seeker sensitive movement were not surprised at the admission or of its inherent instability given the chameleon-like nature of the gathering.

The third type of local church resembles a petrol station. The believers gather with a commitment to the four practices listed in Acts 2:42, with the result that they are equipped to go out into the marketplace to make disciples in obedience to the Lord's command (Mat 28:18-20). This type of local church has as its primary target audience followers of Jesus Christ. In this context, the believers are built up in the faith because 'teaching them to observe all I have commanded you' is at work. The believers study the apostles' doctrine for understanding and obedience; they are identified with a local body of believers and encouraged by the body with which they identify; they witness to the body and blood of Christ given for them; and they offer corporate, public prayer. Knowing what God has revealed and understanding their responsibility to that revelation, habitually and publicly gathering as a local manifestation of the universal body of Christ, again contemplating the person and work of Christ, and gathering to ask God's blessing on efforts to live as faithful followers as well as praising him for his person and work form the fuel that is needed for believers to go out as his witnesses.

Of these three models of local church, only the last one reflects the example of the New Testament local church and avoids the extremes of looking inward and simply blending in with our surroundings. While the last model does not guarantee an easy existence, the first two guarantee a significant struggle due to their faulty assumptions and goals.

The character of a local church alone is not all that should be considered; her immediate situation also is important. Three different situations should be noted, the first of which is a time of revival. Revival is defined here not as 'the employment of unusual or special means but rather the extraordinary degree of blessing attending the normal means of grace'.[39] It is what revival scholars label 'the outpouring of God's grace' so that

unusual growth occurs although no special methods have been followed.

For example, Flanders experienced a time of revival at the end of the twentieth century; all evangelical church groups in Flanders had sudden, unexpected growth. While the specific form of gathering and the evangelistic techniques varied, all of these Flemish groups experienced an unexplained and dramatic increase in the number of evangelical converts and then subsequent local church plantings during a period of about fifteen years. Just as suddenly and dramatically, the unexplained growth came to a halt.[40] Local churches in such contexts of revival should be experiencing growth, both numerically and in faith. The common struggle during the Flemish time of revival was to keep up with the opportunities to share the evangelical message and then to shepherd those who had come to faith![41] If a local church is not growing during a time of revival, something is wrong.

The second situation is persecution. Despite the fact that Europe prides itself in a post-modern tolerance, some local churches or individual believers experience persecution because of changes in governmental policies, the local religious setting, or because of changing neighbourhood demographics which bring hostile people near to the place of gathering.[42] To accept and practise an evangelical faith may come at the cost of job loss, loss of relationships with family and friends, and even loss of life. For example, evangelical churches in Serbia face financial, social and governmental opposition from the Serbian Orthodox Church.[43] British and German Muslims who convert to Christianity can expect ostracism, beatings or worse.[44] Governmental permission to gather or to repair or use a purpose-built facility may be denied, for example in predominately Muslim Bosnia and Herzegovina.[45] Even twenty-first century Spanish evangelicals have lost their place of meeting as the result of overt governmental hostility.[46] Sometimes the hostility to Christianity is violent and public such as at a recent Christian youth festival in Germany.[47] More common in Western Europe, however, is the closing of professions to those holding to an evangelical faith who decline to follow governmental mandates which support abortion or same-sex marriage.[48]

In such a climate of persecution local churches either flourish or fade. Those that continue and stay numerically small may do so due to lack of a large enough meeting place, due to the desire

not to attract hostile attention, or because of a failure of nerve in the face of pressure. Nonetheless, those who continue to gather, those who continue to have a public local witness as followers of Jesus Christ should not be faulted for having a gathering which is 'too small'. As time progresses, European Christians may find that they need to reflect on the lessons of church history and of the underground house churches in China as they consider whether a gathering is too small.[49]

The third type of situation is 'normal times'. While the message of the Gospel will always be at odds with that of the world, in historical perspective most Western nations allow believers a fairly significant level of freedom. This has not always been the case since the formation of the Church in Acts 2, and even now it is not the norm in many parts of the world. The West provides a measure of freedom that other local churches can only dream of. In this normal context, if a local church struggles and remains small, but not by design, one should study the 'shape' of this local church.

4. The 'shape' of the local church

Many thoughtful studies offer a variety of sociological and functional markers to evaluate local churches,[50] but the purpose of this essay is a more fundamental and indeed theological or biblical evaluation. How can a biblical-theological foundation be laid upon which such functional studies can build? One way to evaluate a local church from biblical perspective is to use the four historical marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Because definitions of these four marks have differed widely throughout the ages – a challenge noted by theologians such as G.C. Berkouwer – I will give a succinct set of definitions which are in line with what many free church groupings would understand.[51] Before defining these terms, however, one must understand that these four historical marks of the Church should be reflected in her local manifestations because 'both the universal Church (Eph. 1:23) and the local church (1 Cor. 12:27) are described as the body of Christ'.[52] 'A congregation *is* the body of Christ in the particular locale in which it gathers together.'[53]

One refers to the unity of the Church, as seen in the role of the Holy Spirit who has made the many one (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:21-22, 4:4). 1 Corinthians 3:16 uses the plural 'you' indicating that the Holy Spirit dwells in the gathered body of believers.[54] A commentator on Ephesians 2:22 notes, 'God chooses to be present in the communion of the saints.'[55] Oneness that is based upon the work of the Holy Spirit does not require sameness (1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:11-15). To require sameness would be to hold a less-than-biblical basis for unity.

Holy is based upon the positional or declared holiness of the believers, as evidenced by their title 'saints' in Ephesians 1:1, as well as a practical outworking of this status in Ephesians 4:1.[56] A holy church is one which recognises the positional holiness of the believers and does not add a legalistic framework of human expectations. Conversely, a holy church would not simply accept positional holiness and ignore the practice which should follow position. Positional holiness is not an excuse for unrighteous living because believers should not tolerate sin.[57]

Catholic refers to the universality of all who are in Christ in line with Ephesians 2:12-19. This depicts the Church of Christ as neither broader nor narrower than those who are part of the body through the crosswork of Christ. Accordingly, catholicity has been associated with correct faith since its earliest usage in the post-Apostolic age.[58] The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes, 'Christianity knows no boundaries beyond those which God himself has in his good pleasure established; no boundaries of race or age, class, or status, nationality, or language.'[59] Rather, the Church is composed of 'the countless multitudes who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from every nation and people and age.'[60] He also notes, 'The local church can, however, legitimately call itself catholic because it attaches itself to the universal church.'[61] Referring to the beliefs of the early Church and in particular the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Vitaly Borovoy writes, 'To be Christ's disciple, his follower and his confessor meant at the same time to be "catholic", that is, to be a member of one "catholic" universal church.' He goes on to say more generally, 'This inseparability of faith in Jesus Christ and membership of his catholic Church is so obvious that the terms "Christian" and "Catholic" in the minds of the first Christians belonged to each other as a first name belongs to a surname.'[62]

Apostolic is to practise and promulgate the doctrine of the apostles. The body of Christ, his Church, is built on the foundation of the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).[63] A local church must follow the teachings of the apostles since the Church which the Lord promised he

would build and which the apostles established is 'one unified church' with 'one eternal rule of faith'.[64] As Tertullian noted:

> We are not permitted to cherish any doctrine after our own will, nor yet to make choice of that which another has introduced of his private fancy. In the Lord's apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations the doctrine which they received from Christ…[65]

Given the sharp, public correction of the apostle Peter by the apostle Paul when Peter veered towards a Judaistic legalism (Gal 2:11-14), the reader understands that it is not the positions but the teaching of the apostles upon which the universal Church and, in turn, the local church are built. 'The persons mentioned in [Eph.] 2:20a stand in this case for the functions which they fulfill … The proclamation, witness, and confession for which they stand – this is the foundation of the Church.'[66]

Why are this biblical standard and model important when evaluating a local church? Because to violate this biblical standard is to guarantee that a local church will struggle significantly. Unity which is based upon sociological markers, for example, is unity which fades as the culture or the fashion changes. Further, the gathered people will find it difficult to seek the mind of the Lord in various matters if they have not been unified into one body by the baptism of the Holy Spirit which happens at the time of one's justification (1 Cor 12:13).[67] 'The baptism in the Spirit which the risen Lord then effects incorporates [believers] into one body.'[68]

Legalism which masquerades as holiness builds a local body which is a pale imitation of the biblical model and the freedom that believers have once they are in Christ. Believers are neither under the Law nor under an extra-biblical set of strictures (Rom 10:5; Gal 3:1-3; Col 2:20-23).[69] While holiness is not legalism, neither is it unbridled license (Eph 5:1-21). Persons who are in Christ should act according to their new family relationship. Since the local church is primarily a gathering of those in Christ, the family resemblance should be evident. The necessity of this family resemblance becomes apparent in churches whose numbers are dwindling as they imitate the morals and values of the surrounding culture rather than those of the Bible, or have become a legalistic caricature of

the New Testament Church; they lack the family resemblance.[70]

The catholicity of a local church which refuses fellowship with other believers due to differences of opinion over practice, tradition or culture makes a mockery of the price paid for a person's salvation. Conversely, to link arms with all the generally religious or those who preach a different gospel also makes a mockery of the crosswork of Christ. The New Testament is particularly pointed in its rejection of any 'gospel' which does not centre on the crosswork of Christ (Gal 1:6-9); the completed crosswork is of 'first importance' (1 Cor 15:3-8). The Lord's charge to the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 was to make disciples. Disciples are believers who manifest identity and conformity: identity through the public act of baptism which marks the believer as a follower of the Triune God, and conformity in observing 'all I have commanded you'.

To ignore the Scripture's teaching on the nature of the local church as evidenced in the marks of one, holy, catholic and apostolic is to guarantee that a local church will struggle. These timeless, biblical marks provide the parameters of unity, standing, conduct, universality and teaching.

5. Conclusion

So does the small, struggling local church in Europe have a future? If it is large enough to observe effectively the four things to which the first local church was devoted in Acts 2:42; if it has recognised, local leadership; if it accurately manifests the four marks of the Church, then a local church is large enough. If during 'normal' times or a time of revival, a local church struggles due to its inward-focused or chameleon-like nature, or if it struggles because it does not display the four biblical marks of the Church, then this small church needs radical, biblical change.

What should be the attitude of those who are committed to and minister in small churches which are faithful to Acts 2:42 and the four biblical marks of the Church? In a time when the culture says that only the large will do, one needs to remember that the Lord who said 'I will build my Church' is the same God who used little Israel to display his glory before mighty Egypt, and who used but one hundred twenty frightened believers to set the world alight with his Gospel. 'God is the God who derives most glory from situations that other people have written off. The depth of the

darkness makes the starlight even more wonderful. The impossibility of a set of circumstances can be used by God to show his splendour.'[71]

Dr T. J. Marinello is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Tyndale Theological Seminary, Badhoevedorp, Netherlands.

Endnotes

1 This threefold post setting does not include all peoples of Europe as many recent immigrants are pre-modern in their outlook or at least not committed to the radical secularisation project of post-modern Europe. See Sander L. Gilman, 'The Parallels of Islam and Judaism in Diaspora', *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51.31 (8 April 2005), accessed 18 August 2013, http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=0167a206-89f1-4e0a-9733-06ef4126d1b%40sessionmgr104&vid=1&hid=112&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=rlh&AN=16744321; Gracie Davie, 'Is Europe an Exceptional Case?', *International Review of Mission* 95.378/379 (Jul/Oct 2006) 247-258; Gustavo Benavides, 'Islam and European Identity: From the Mozarabic Chronicle to the Jyllands-Posten Cartoons', *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 36.4 (2007) 94-97; David Pryce-Jones, 'Europe's "Terrible Transformation"?', *Commentary* 124.1 (2007) 58-61.

2 John O'Sullivan, 'Our Post-Christian Society: Christianity, post-Christianity, and the future of the West' (lecture, Inaugural conference of the Transatlantic Christian Council, Brussels, 4 December 2013), accessed 14 December 2013, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/366263/our-post-christian-society-john-osullivan.

3 Kenneth Minogue, '"Christophobia" and the West: On the Consequences of Secular Faiths', *The New Criterion* (21 June 2003) 4, accessed 14 December 2013, https://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/-ldquo-Christophobia--and-the-West-1355.

4 Chris E. M. Wigram, 'Evangelising or Re-Evangelising Europe?', *Echoes Mission Magazine*, 141.2005 (2012) 6. Cf. Michael Gryboski, 'Richard Dawkins Calls Himself a "Cultural Anglican", Has "Certain Love" for Tradition', *Christian Post Europe* (12 September 2013), accessed 26 September 2013, http://global.christianpost.com/news/richard-dawkins-calls-himself-a-cultural-anglican-has-certain-love-for-tradition-104415/.

5 Ron Diprose, 'Contemporary Roman Catholicism in Europe', *Echoes Mission Magazine* 141.2008 (2012) 161.

6 Karel Dobbelaere, 'Trends in de Katholieke godsdienstigheid eind 20ste eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie* 24.1 (2003) 13-15.

7 Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004). As a practical outworking of post-Christendom, see Tim Stanley, 'Door-to-door death units: Belgium and Holland abandon humanity as they embrace euthanasia', *The Telegraph* (3 October 2013), accessed 4 October 2013, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/timstanley/100239650/door-to-door-death-units-belgium-and-holland-abandon-humanity-as-they-embrace-euthanasia/.

8 Diprose, 'Contemporary Roman Catholicism', 160.

9 Simon Coss and Martin Banks, 'Pope's call for "Christian values" in EU constitution under attack', EuropeanVoice.com (4 July 2002), accessed 25 September 2013, http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/pope-s-call-for-christian-values-in-eu-constitution-under-attack/45159.aspx.

10 Iordan Bărbulescu and Gabriel Andreescu, 'References to God and the Christian Tradition in the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe: An Examination of the Background', *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 8.24 (2009) 207. For an extended deliberation of this issue, see Madeleine Heyward, 'What Constitutes Europe?: Religion, Law and Identity in the Draft Constitution for the European Union', *Hanse Law Review* 1.2 (2005) 227-235.

11 John Benton, 'The Big Picture for Small Churches', *Evangelicals Now* (July 2005), accessed 1 October 2013, http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-3050-The-big-picture-for-small-churches.htm.

12 Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 'Megachurch Definition', Hartford Seminary, accessed 17 September 2013, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html.

13 Warrren Bird, 'Global Megachurches, World's Largest Attendance', accessed 18 September 2013, https://docs.google.com/a/leadnet.org/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AvaIHyk8hrPydE9hcFAzVnEwWktrVUNETjVJWVJJWUE&hl=en_US#gid=0; Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 'Megachurch Definition'.

14 'History', Christian Associates International, accessed 17 September 2013, http://christianassociates.org/who/history/.

15 E.g., one proponent of large churches posits quality programming, more effective outreach and efficiency of resources as arguments in favour of the large local church. See Greg Cootsona, 'So Many People, so Little Time: The Challenge for Large Churches', *Congregations* 1.31 (Winter 2005) 19.

16 Whether or not one holds, as I do, that this verse is more than a historical description of the practices of the Church immediately after its beginning at Pentecost, certainly these 'four elements identified

the Christian community sociologically as a distinct and constituted group'. Agustín del Agua Pérez, 'El papel de la 'escuela midrásica' en la configuración del Nuevo Testamento,' *Estudios eclesiásticos* 60.234 (1985) 336. NB: All translations are by the essay's author unless indicated otherwise.

17 Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Anchor Bible 31; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 22.

18 Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Anchor Bible 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 270.

19 F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT, 1954; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 79.

20 Fitzmyer, *Acts,* 270.

21 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 146.

22 For a helpful, extended discussion see William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 22-28.

23 Richard N. Longenecker, 'The Acts of the Apostles', in *The Expositors Bible Commentary* 9: John–Acts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 289.

24 John Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews Chapters 8:1– 10:39, Works of John Owen* 22 (1854–55; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991) 518-529.

25 Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 526-530.

26 Fitzmyer, *Acts,* 271.

27 John H. Armstrong, 'Introduction: Do This in Remembrance of Me', in *Understanding Four Views of the Lord's Supper,* ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 11, 13.

28 Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 111.

29 Christopher A. Hall, *Worshipping with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009) 89.

30 Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1986) 266. Cf. Guy Bonneau, 'Pour y achever l'organisation (Tite i,5): L'institutionnalisation de l'Église au temps du Nouveau Testament', *Science et Esprit* 52.1 (2000) 95, 97.

31 Strauch, *Biblical Eldership,* 265.

32 For a discussion of the nature of the responsibilities of local church leaders as well as their requisite characteristics, see Strauch, 'Summoning the Elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38)', 168-169, 'Peter's Instruction to the Asian Elders (1 Peter 5:1-5)', 295-317, and 'Paul's Instruction to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17–25)', 211-264, in *Biblical Eldership.*

33 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Word Biblical Commentary 43; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 10.

34 For a discussion of God's revelation with respect to church polity, see Steven B. Cowan (ed.), *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

35 Anonymous, conversations with author.

36 For a summary of this language challenge, some solutions and some happy unexpected results, see Ken Behnken, 'Living between Cultures: The second generation immigrant and refugee – a new challenge for the church', accessed 23 September 2013, http://www.centerforusmissions.com/Portals/ 0/pdfs/articles/between-cultures-behnken.pdf. While this refers to the situation in the USA, the European issues and outcomes remain very similar if not identical.

37 See Travis I. Barbour and Nicholas E. Toews, 'The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique', *Directions* 39.1 (2010) 32-40; Don Closson, 'The Emerging Church', Probe Ministries (2006), accessed 30 September 2013, http://www.probe. org/site/pp.aspx?c=fdKEIMNsEoG&b=4225675 &printmode=1.

38 Bob Burney, 'A Shocking "Confession" from Willow Creek Community Church', Townhall.com (30 October 2007), accessed 23 September 2013, http://townhall.com/columnists/bobburney/ 2007/10/30/a_shocking_%E2%80%9Cconfessio n%E2%80%9D_from_willow_creek_community_ church/page/full; Matt Branaugh, 'Willow Creek's "Huge Shift": Influential megachurch moves away from seeker-sensitive services', *Christianity Today* (18 May 2008), accessed 23 September 2013, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/ june/5.13.html.

39 Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750–1858* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) 129.

40 For more on one denomination's experiences during the Flemish revivals, see Thomas J. Marinello, *New Brethren in Flanders: The Origins and Development of the 'Evangelische Christengemeenten Vlaanderen', 1971–2008* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

41 Richard Haverkamp, interview by author, St. Martens Latem, Belgium, 30 April 2003.

42 Kevin J. Jones, 'Europe: 85 Percent Of Hate Crimes Committed Against Christians', *Catholic News Agency* (22 March 2012), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.eurasiareview.com/22032012- europe-85-percent-of-hate-crimes-committed- against-christians/; Jonathan Petre, 'Ministers won't back cross-ban Christians: Ex-archbishop condemns "illiberal" assault on faith', *Mail Online* (6 April 2012), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/ article-2072555/Ministers-wont-cross-ban- Christians-Ex-archbishop-condemns-illiberal- assault-faith.html?ito=feeds-newsxml.

43 'Serbian evangelical church fire-bombed',

Persecution.org (19 December 2006), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.persecution.org/2006/12/19/serbian-evangelical-church-fire-bombed/.

44 'Muslim apostates threatened over Christianity', *Times Online* (9 December 2007), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1571970/Muslim-apostates-threatened-over-Christianity.html.

45 Drasko Djenovic, 'Obstacles to legally building a place of worship' (13 July 2006), accessed 26 September 2013, Persecution.org, http://www.persecution.org/2006/07/13/obstacles-to-legally-building-a-place-of-worship/.

46 'Evangelical Church Still Homeless After One Year', *World Watch Monitor* (5 January 2005), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.world-watchmonitor.org/2005/01-January/newsarticle_3628.html/.

47 Michael Baggot, 'Vicious Protestors in Germany Harass 15,000 Strong Christian Youth Festival', LifeSiteNews.com (22 May 2008), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive//ldn/2008/may/08052210.

48 Katherine Weber, 'UK Christian Health Worker Sues Over Dismissal for Pro-Life Views', *Christian Post Europe* (29 May 2012), accessed 26 September 2013, http://global.christianpost.com/news/uk-christian-health-worker-sues-over-dismissal-for-pro-life-views-75715/; 'Dutch Christian Civil Servant Fired For Opposing Gay Marriage', Persecution.org (18 November 2011), accessed 26 September 2013, http://www.persecution.org/2011/11/18/dutch-christian-civil-servant-fired-for-opposing-gay-marriage/. For a recent comprehensive list and helpful discussion, see Gudrun Kugler (ed.), *Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination in Europe: Report 2012* (Wien: Kairos, 2013), and Gudrun Kugler (ed.), *Shadow Report on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, 2005-2010* (Vienna: Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, 2010).

49 See 'A Look Inside China's House Church Movement', World Serve Ministries, accessed 27 September 2013, http://us.worldserve.org/blog/look-inside-chinas-house-church-movement.

50 Cf. J. Hendriks, *Een vitale en aantrekkelijke gemeente: model en methode van gemeenteopbouw* (Kampen: Kok, 1990).

51 G.C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 12. For a comparison of the four marks of the Church from a high order church perspective, viz. Roman Catholic, see Avery Dulles, 'The True Church' in *Models of the Church*, exp. ed. (London: Image Books, 2002) 114-129; 'The Hierarchical Structure of the Church with Special Reference to the Episcopate', chap-ter three in 'The Church, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' in Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publishers, 1966) 37-56; Hans Küng, 'The Dimensions of the Church: The Church is Catholic', in *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 296-318.

52 David J. MacLeod, 'The Primacy of Scripture and the Church' in Joseph M. Vogl and John H. Fish (eds), *Understanding the Church: the Biblical Ideal for the 21st Century* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1999) 20 n. 39.

53 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 138.

54 Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 146-147.

55 Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Anchor Bible 34A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 274.

56 For the practical outworking of holiness, see Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6* (Anchor Bible 34B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 453-462.

57 Berkouwer, *The Church*, 357.

58 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265.

59 Herman Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church', *Calvin Theological Journal* 27.2 (1992) 224.

60 Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church', 227.

61 Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church', 221.

62 Vitaly Borovoy, 'The Meaning of Catholicity', *Ecumenical Review* 16.1 (1963) 26; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 265.

63 For a discussion as to the New Testament identity of these apostles and prophets, see Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Word Biblical Commentary 42; Dallas: Word, 1990) 183.

64 Shayne J.D. Cohen, 'A Virgin Defiled: Some Rabbinic and Christian Views on the Origins of Heresy', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36.1 (1980) 1.

65 Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 6.

66 Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, 316.

67 Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 603. For a summary explanation of the baptising work of the Holy Spirit as the means by which the believer is put into the body, and that this baptism happens at the time of justification, see D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 43-47.

68 F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 281.

69 James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996) 188-198.

70 See Scott Roberts, 'Scotland: Church minister defects over gay clergy', PinkNews (5 October 2012), accessed 30 September 2013, http://www.

pinknews.co.uk/2012/10/05/scotland-church-minister-defects-over-gay-clergy/. See also Roger Gresham Cooke, 'The Exclusive Taylorites', *The Spectator* (7 August 1964), accessed 1 October 2013, The Spectator Archive, http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/7th-august-1964/8/the-exclusive-taylorites; David V. Barrett, 'Exclusive Brethren', in *The New Believers: Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions* (London: Cassell, 2001) 162-166.

71 John Benton, *The big picture for small churches – and large ones, too! How to thrive and survive as a small congregation* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2005) 16.