

Fear not, little flock

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [July 18, 2001](#) issue

For a little over 20 years now I have been vesting for services in the cluttered sacristy off the nave of Christ Episcopal Church in Island Pond, Vermont. The exterior architecture and worship space of this 19th-century Carpenter Gothic church are as lovely as one is likely to find in rural New England; we can boast a mechanical tower clock that still keeps time, a rare Canadian pipe organ that still makes music (more or less), and English stained glass windows that on some mornings can speckle the whitewashed walls with all the colors of the brook trout native to our streams.

What we can no longer boast is a congregation of the size that gave the church all of these treasures. Among our smaller heirlooms is a photo of the Sunday school that dates from the days when Island Pond was a busy railroad junction. Some 30 children pose in their knickers and pinafores—roughly the number of our current Sunday attendance for all ages. I can recall years when the average was closer to a dozen.

It was in those lean times that I began the habit of whispering to myself as I left the sacristy to begin the service: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Jesus had said those words to his little flock of followers in Galilee, and I often took comfort from saying them to his little flock in Island Pond.

Sometimes, though, I wonder if I have been too quick to interpret the fear of Jesus’ little flock as a natural consequence of its being little. In other words, I tend to think of Jesus as saying, “Don’t be afraid because you are little, but rather believe that God has destined you for something great.” That may amount to a reasonable interpretation—for followers in Jesus’ time.

Right now, however, it is hard to believe that any Christian community with the benefit of unabridged Old and New Testaments would have reason to fear because it was little. Quite the contrary. The scriptures are continually driving home the theme of God’s particular solicitude for the small gathering, the tiny remnant, the little flock. Those who drew up the lectionary deftly paired the Gospel reading with the

story of God's promise to make Abram—a man “as good as dead,” according to the reading from the Hebrews—the father of a great nation. In the light of the scriptures, one might assume that nothing could make any worshiping community more nervous (or perhaps I should say “more humble”) than to see itself engorged with numbers, resources, programs—“potency.” As for the little congregations, the churches “just hanging on,” we might almost expect bishops and synods to impose temporary bans on their reading the Bible in the hopes of avoiding dangerous outbreaks of ecstatic enthusiasm and wild hope.

Instead we cling to a worldly notion of “viability,” which is based not on a church's zeal to work for the kingdom of God, but on its means to do two peripheral things: maintain a building and pay a minister. This amounts to telling Abram that instead of looking at the stars he had better look at his sperm counts. It is no surprise that Jesus follows his exhortation to “Fear not” with the words, “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out . . .,” etc. The little flock is most viable when it can travel light. In fact, the little flock is so viable precisely because it *can* travel light.

At this point you may be assuming that all I wish to do is “make the case for the small church,” which means you may also be thinking, “It's already been made—ad nauseam.” But the case I wish to make here is not so much for the small church as for thinking of the basic Christian cell as something smaller than a church. In theory, of course, we already do that. We talk about “the Christian family,” and we drag out that text about “wherever two or three are gathered in my name” whenever service attendance takes a major hit from the Super Bowl. I do not think, however, that we have paid much more than lip service to the idea of two or three people, or four or five—perhaps members of the same household and perhaps not—as the primary building block of the Christian enterprise.

No doubt if we did, the first thing we'd try to do is give it a name: “Little Flocks: A Model of Intimate Ministry” (complete with video and study guides). I'd say the first thing we ought to do is avoid naming it at all. Have you ever noticed how Jesus is never called by name in the resurrection stories? He is known “in the breaking of the bread” and in the showing of his wounds. More and more I wish that we were known that way too. I sometimes think that the first wrong turn in our history was not when Constantine made ours an official religion but when our ancestors at Antioch gave themselves a name. At that point we acquired the first in a series of progressively narrower “identities” that often seem to obscure our mystical identification with the

One.

Anyway, I sometimes imagine a small group of people who meet for supper at least once a week to offer prayers and to discuss how the “campaign” is going. I imagine them rejoicing at their successes—the antagonisms they have managed to sabotage, the secret messages of hope they have managed to deliver—and rejoicing no less in how small they are in relation to their work. They are “dressed for action” and have their lamps lit. They seem to expect a knock at the door. And yes, yes, they still “go to church.” But they go knowing, even before someone official can tell them so, that they *are* the church.