

Lessons for a small world

By [David Williams](#)

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It was a reflection that came to me, as things often do, as I was walking.

I was musing on the seeming insanity of my devoting so much time to studying [small faith communities](#), on what possible relevance that might have to the great wild churn of faith. So much of what makes for viable small faith communities seems alien to the society in which I live, to success and expansion. Think big! Think corporate! Think growth growth growth!

Small churches aren't that. They're tribes and families, an old and deeply human way of being together. But they're not reflective of the dynamism of our technological culture. It feels out of step with both our globalism and our deepening ability to virtually surround ourselves with exactly the folks we want to be with.

If you don't like a faith community, your remedy is simple. You just leave it. If the pastor preaches something that isn't exactly what you think is true, or if someone does something that steps on your toes, you just go somewhere else. Go to another church that better suits you. Or stop going to church at all. It's your choice. We're all free to leave, thank the Maker. Find the place that is exactly right for you, our society says, and so we do.

That's a good thing, on so many levels. Being forced to remain in oppressive community is a nightmare. Being forced to stay in a place where you cannot be yourself and authentic is a terrible thing.

And small can take work. The work of seeking consensus, the mutual forbearance and patience necessary to sustain the life of little churches? That can be hard, particularly if you feel passionately about X or have found your life's purpose in Y. It is much, much easier to seek out the ideal, the community where X is everyone's passion and everyone around you believes Y.

You can't do this in healthy small churches. You just can't. There, kindness, patience, and forbearance must rule. A willingness to show grace in authentic difference has

to abide, or the whole thing comes apart. Or it devolves into darker and unhealthy things, closed off and controlling, bitter and shallow and broken.

I can see the relevance of the small church to healthy family life and relationships. It bears a strong resemblance to those things. A willingness to live graciously with difference and not seek your own interest above your partner's life is a vital part of any marriage or relationship. The same is true in the tribe. Power and self-seeking tear the tribe apart.

But in the "grand scheme of things?" I've struggled. In my darker moments, tiny churches feel quaint, weak, and irrelevant cast against the grand bright scale of our world, where power and profit and growth and ideology rule.

Then, out of some deep recess of my subconscious, I remembered that little talk Carl gave once, about a little blue dust mote. Oh, love him though I do, he and I aren't on the same page on a few things. But that's OK. We agree very, very deeply on this: all we know and everything we are exists in a tiny, limited space.

We are creatures of a small planet, just one. And we can't leave, not yet, not in any meaningful numbers and not for any significant period of time. When we imagine that the virtual worlds we create for ourselves are reflective of our reality, those places where we surround ourselves only with People Like Us (tm)? We're deluding ourselves. When we surround ourselves with like-thinkers, the hum of that echo chamber comforting in our ears? It's a falsehood.

This world is itself a small community, a little tiny island in a vast and inhospitable ocean. There is nowhere else for us to go. We can't just pack up and storm off because of our passion for X or our belief that Y is the one true way.

We have to be connected, because we are. We're stuck here together, on this tiny, tiny world.

And suddenly, the [learnings about what it means to live graciously in smallness](#) seemed relevant again.

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