

The body of Christ: tough & fragile

By [Ruth Everhart](#)

January 3, 2016

When I was in seminary I was taught this: *Small churches are tough. You can't beat them to death with a stick!*

I believed that truism, and repeated it to others. Now I have fresh experience that allows me to see the backside of that truism, which is also true: *Small churches are fragile.*

So far in my career I have served two small churches as solo pastor—six years at Rock Creek Presbyterian (in a rural area outside Springfield, Illinois) and ten years at Poolesville Presbyterian (in a surprisingly rural corner of Montgomery County, Maryland).

Both of those congregations had long histories and many strengths. But both congregations also had serious weaknesses in three pivotal areas: histories that included conflicted relationships with previous pastors, inadequate buildings, and very few financial assets (less than \$20,000 total savings). In some senses those weaknesses functioned as strengths because they had gotten everyone's attention. The lay leaders knew that their churches were on the brink of failure and were ready to work hard—and perhaps even take some risks—to save them. Accordingly, I was able to enter into a robust partnership with the lay leaders and have fruitful ministry.

Actually, my seminary training in small church ministry did stand me in good stead. I had learned that the lay leaders would, in some sense, give me the side-eye because I would always be the interloper. I accepted that as a reality and was willing to shake up certain internal systems, knowing I would never be one of them. (I could write about the costs of that on a pastor and her family, but that is for another day.)

I am happy and proud that both congregations not only did well under my leadership, but continue to do well under the leadership of my successor. Indeed, I am perhaps inordinately proud of those successes. But it is hard to describe the tremendous joy-filled experience of the Spirit's presence within the walls of a sanctuary—especially when it is full of worshipers with whom you have built specific,

individual relationships. So it was also hard to leave and to stay out, as previous pastors must. Perhaps that good feeling about fruitful ministry helped me keep my distance so the church could continue to thrive.

In the three years since I have stepped aside from pastoring churches to focus on writing, I have continued to be involved in the life of churches on Sunday mornings—by supply preaching and teaching adult ed classes. The two activities occur at very different kinds of churches: the supply preaching is usually at struggling small churches, and the teaching is usually at thriving larger churches (with the ability to pay someone to teach a class—such luxury!).

For the past three months I have filled the pulpit at a small church that had fallen on hard times. By the time I arrived, I was not there to provide pastoral leadership. That day had come and gone. An administrative commission was in place to deal with leadership issues and make decisions. My task was simply to show up on Sunday mornings and preach them out of existence. On most Sundays there were between six and ten people in attendance.

Our [final service](#) was on the fourth Sunday of Advent. I was so grateful that the church was full—friends from nearby churches, former members, and folks from a congregation with which it was formerly yoked. There was even a choral number, thanks to the local Episcopal church. We sang rousing Christmas songs with energy that bounced off the sanctuary walls. It was a good goodbye.

The whole experience has taught me some things, which I will need more time to unpack. For one thing, it has made me revisit previous successes and failures from the perspective of a church that lost viability. Why does one church make a turnaround and begin to thrive again, while another church dwindles and fails? I suspect I have some answers, and will discover others.

But I need to record at least this much: my seminary professors were wrong about one thing: you *can* beat a church to death with a stick. The body of Christ, like every body, is tough, but it is also fragile. Like every discovery of fragility, this realization has brought with it a renewed tenderness—for this precious thing we call church.

*Originally posted at [Love the Work \(do the work\)](#)*