



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

The Beauty of Small Churches with Ron Johnston Season 5, Episode 7 Transcript

[00:00:00.280] - Announcer

Welcome to the Gospel for Life Podcast. We help churches make disciples. Now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:09.670] - Darryl Dash

Well, welcome back to the Gospel for Life podcast. And today, I want to talk about small churches.

In our culture, we tend to think that for a church to be successful, it has to become big. And over the past decade, I've visited many churches. I've had the privilege of speaking as a guest preacher, and I've come to see the beauty of all kinds of churches, including the beauty of small ones. In fact, sometimes I've been struck overwhelmingly that many of the churches I visit that I thought would be small or even struggling have been full of life and beauty, even though that they're small.

Small churches are not failures if they don't become big churches. They're just a different creature altogether. They're just small churches. And you can have healthy small churches and unhealthy ones, just like you can have unhealthy large churches as well as healthy ones. But the problem is that many small churches feel like they're failures, and many pastors of small churches feel like they should be doing more to help their church become a big church.

[00:01:22.770] - Darryl Dash

I believe we need to start to recover a vision for the beauty of the small church. And so today, I'm really happy to speak to a new friend of mine. His name is Ron Johnston, and he's an executive director of Small Church Connections. I met him recently, and we got together for a coffee, and I was so encouraged by our conversation.

So Ron, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:43.590] - Ron Johnston

Thank you. It's wonderful to be here.

[00:01:45.970] - Darryl Dash

So encouraged to talk to you as somebody I know who has pastored small churches as I have, and somebody who knows Ernest and Amelia White, just one of the greatest couples that I've ever had the privilege of knowing.

[00:01:59.220] - Ron Johnston

I would certainly say Amen to that. They're a wonderful couple.

[00:02:05.000] - Darryl Dash

Ron, you believe in the value of the small church. Why are small churches so valuable?

[00:02:12.710] - Ron Johnston

Primarily because they're part of the body of Christ. And it's that relationship with Jesus that gives every church its value and its purpose. And that's just as true of a small church as a large one. In fact, I often say to small churches that when I speak in them, I'll often say that if I came back in a few years time and they had grown enormously and their budget was three times what it is right now, and they were running programs everywhere. I'll say you would not be one speck more valuable in the eyes of God than you are right at this moment, because you'd still be a part of the body of Christ.

[00:03:00.600] - Darryl Dash

Where did we get this idea that you have to be a big church in order to be successful?

[00:03:05.790] - Ron Johnston

I think that the beginnings of it began back in the 1950s with a movement called the Church Growth Movement. And the emphasis of that was that if you just do the right things, then you'll grow numerically. And God wants every church to grow. And when I graduated from Bible College, I got all caught up in that movement and even had the audacity one time to say to my church, there's no reason why we can't be a church of a thousand. But I've come to realize that it's done a lot of harm over the decades since then.

[00:03:48.570] - Darryl Dash

Well, I'm encouraged that you have pastored smaller churches. So one of the struggles I have is sometimes you read a really good book or you go to a conference where they elevate small church ministry, but the speakers are all from mega churches. And it is this irony that we platform all the people who are successful in worldly terms. As somebody who has pastored small churches, as I have, what were some of the struggles that you had? Did you sometimes feel like you were less successful because the church wasn't maybe a thousand people as you might have hoped it would be?

[00:04:27.550] - Ron Johnston

For a long time in my ministry, I had that dream that someday I would pastor a really large church. Maybe not a mega church, but quite a large one. And it was very difficult with that idea to feel satisfied. But I've come to appreciate a couple of things. One, I came to a point in my ministry where I just realized that I wasn't gifted. I wasn't equipped, really, to pastor a really large church. And I was completely content with that. I also realized that ministry really is no matter what the size of a church, ministry is to individuals. And I could minister to individuals just as well within a small church as I could within a large one. And those things just gave me a sense of peace and satisfaction with being in a smaller church setting.

[00:05:28.750] - Darryl Dash

So you've highlighted a couple of things there. One is the discontentment that we sometimes feel with the ministries God has given us. And I've been convicted about that the times when I pastored, and I've just viewed the church through the lens rather than of gratitude of the privilege of pastoring the group of people who've been entrusted to me, this sense of discontentment that this isn't enough.

And I think the other thing you mentioned is just an awareness of our giftedness that I remember one of my friends said he went to seminary in Louisville and attended a very large church and the pastor there wrote books. And he said, you need to understand that that guy isn't any more gifted than the average pastor. He's just gifted differently in a different area. And just even to I realized. I think sometimes, going off the parable of the talents, it's true that God entrusts different... He certainly gives people more resources than others, but he just calls us to be faithful with what he's given us And whether it's a little or a lot, it doesn't matter. We're called to be faithful.

[00:06:34.380] - Ron Johnston

That is so true. One of the things that I think is so incredibly important for anyone who's in some aspect of full-time Christian ministry is that sense that God has called you, and that's why you're there. And for myself, that has taken me through the really tough times, whether those tough times were with a church or personal or whatever. And it's also given me a sense of... I get up every morning excited about the fact that I get to be a part of what God is doing here on this Earth. And I don't think there's anything more exciting than that that this world has to offer us. And my area in which I get to do that is, from my pastoral ministry experience, was in small churches. So rather than looking at that as as something that was negative, I began to look at it as a real positive that I got to minister to those people.

[00:07:38.370] - Darryl Dash

So at some point, you decided to start a ministry to pastors and to small churches. Talk to me about the story of how did you actually begin to work on Small Church Connections?

[00:07:52.660] - Ron Johnston

I think the seed for it was laid quite a while ago. I attended Billy Graham when he used to crusades. He would have what he called the School of Evangelism. And he brought pastors from all over Canada and the US together. And you got five days of teaching, and then at night you would go to the meetings. And I was attending one in Boston, and we're in this big hotel room, probably about a thousand pastors were there. And I was sitting there towards the end of the week, and somebody was up there speaking, and I thought, This is amazing. I looked around and I thought, I bet you almost everyone here is small church. And all week long, we had only had two groups of speakers, those that pastored a church of at least 5,000 people and those who were part of the Billy Graham Association. And I thought, I wonder how much that's relating to the average person there. And that was the seed. I never really got that out of my mind. And quite a few years later, I was pastoring at a church. I just felt it was time for me to leave there and move on to something else.

[00:09:09.330] - Ron Johnston

And I thought it would just be moving on to another church, but nothing turned up. And I had a number of people tell me, You were our second choice. And I thought, Well, I might as well have been your 73rd choice. And for a whole year, I didn't have a church. And over that time, God just began to, bit by bit, lay that on my heart, just a real concern for small churches. And finally, my wife and I decided that rather than look to be a pastor somewhere, I would begin a ministry to small churches. And so that was how it began.

[00:09:52.620] - Darryl Dash

So tell me about that ministry. What kinds of things do you do to help small churches and pastors of small churches?

[00:09:59.570] - Ron Johnston

Our one-sentence description is that we serve small churches across Canada. And so any way that we can do that, in some cases, just talking with small church pastors and trying to encourage them and praying with them And I've never met a small church pastor that didn't need encouragement. And so that's a major concern that we have. In

2022, in the fall of 2022, we sponsored retreats, one in Alberta, one in Ontario, and one in the Maritimes, for small church pastors. Our whole goal, this came out of COVID, and we knew a lot of pastors were discouraged, and we just wanted to get them away for four days. And I like to say we just wanted to spoil them right. And so we did that in those three locations. Last year, we completed a year ago, we completed a research project that we had been involved in with the The Evangelical Fellowship Canada called Significant Church. And I love that title because that describes exactly how I feel about small churches. And if anyone has not read that and you're involved in a small church, you really need to go to the EFC site and look at it and read it.

[00:11:22.380] - Ron Johnston

They did a marvelous job on it. I do this thing of podcasts and speaking in places and whatever, just whatever we can do to serve small churches.

[00:11:36.220] - Darryl Dash

As you talk to small churches and the leaders of small churches, what are some of the challenges that you find that they're facing?

[00:11:44.290] - Ron Johnston

We've already touched on one, and that is that there is that sense that because we're not a church of at least a few hundred, we're failing. I like to say to people that there's one phrase that I just will not let anyone get away with saying, and that is that we are just a small church. I will insist that they take the just out of that. Small church pastors have been told that if they were really successful, they'd be bigger than they are. Just that encouragement. And one of our goals as an organization, as we look to the future, is to change that mindset in the evangelical world in Canada.

There's so many ways in which small churches have an impact. The leadership is another huge one. It's just more difficult to put together a really quality leadership team when you've got 10 people to choose from, as opposed to that church of 500 that has 50 people to choose from. And leadership is so incredibly important in in churches. Those would be two of the biggies.

[00:13:04.800] - Darryl Dash

I'm sure that you've discovered the strengths of small churches as well. Could you talk about those? What are some of the things that small churches actually have going for them?

[00:13:13.920] - Ron Johnston

At the very top are relationships. That's the soul of a small church. That's why people go to small churches, is because they want that relationship. Now, one of the problems that sometimes exists is that small churches can be really friendly and relational within their church group, and not so much when new people come or whatever. But relationships are everything.

It's interesting. I've asked people in small churches, what's their greatest strength? And 100% of the time, the answer I get back is relationships. They may word it different, but that's what it's all about. And so that's a huge strength. And I would say to small churches that that needs to be the starting point for anything that you plan to do. How do relationships enter into this? How can we take that strength and use it in outreach? How can we take that strength and use it with our young people?

A second thing that I think is really valuable in a small church is that it's always intergenerational. I attended a large church one time for about six months, and you could actually go from being born to about 25 years of age and never be in any meeting or anything with adults because they had a worship program for their teenagers and a worship program for college and career.

[00:14:51.530] - Ron Johnston

And so by the time you went into the main service, you were about in your mid 20s. Whereas a small church doesn't have that option. That intergenerational is just automatically a part of. One church where I pastored, we had one of the members of our elders board that almost every Sunday would go to one of the teenagers and say, Hey, I just want you to know my wife and I are going to be specifically praying for you this week. What can we pray about? And then he'd go back the next Sunday and he'd

say, So how did that exam go? How did you do? And you think that wasn't important to those teenagers?

And that's, again, I've said in some cases to the leaders, If you don't know the name of every child in your small church, and shame on you. So you've got to make sure that you interact with those young people.

Those are two. And another thing that maybe is not specifically in a church, but there's just so many small churches. About 80% of evangelical churches in Canada are small, which means that there's probably somewhere over 8,000 thousand. And I calculated it at one time and thought, if there's 50 people, I think I said, attending each of those churches, then that's about 600,000 people who get their spiritual nourishment from a small church.

[00:16:33.510] - Ron Johnston

And that's significant.

[00:16:35.950] - Darryl Dash

The first church that I pastored was a very small church. I was just so excited to go there. And looking back, I don't think I realized what a privilege it was to be there. Partway, when I got in, I became ambitious and wanted to go to a larger church. And I did. Seven years in, I went to a much larger church, and I actually regret it later.

I still think God was in it. God takes our and brings good out of it. But looking back, I think those were really precious days to be in that small church. But we went back recently and discovered all these years later, that church, which has been through a lot in the years since then, is still going strong. I think that would be, would you say that would be another strength of a small church, that larger churches can be dependent on having a uniquely gifted leader, and a large church can quickly go through a crisis and become a smaller church. But I've just seen smaller churches persevere through difficulties, and they almost seem indestructible in ways. They just keep going even when they go through really hard times.

[00:17:41.430] - Ron Johnston

For sure. For sure. There's an aspect. I had someone in a church just not too long ago say, they brought me, carry me into this church as a baby, and they'll carry me out, and I'll be in this church for my whole life. It's that perseverance. Yeah, that's an important part of small churches.

[00:18:08.110] - Darryl Dash

How can a pastor learn to love the small church? Maybe talk to a pastor who was like me all those years ago and saying, Man, I love this group of people, but I want a bigger church. How can we actually learn to be content with the church that God has given us?

[00:18:22.270] - Ron Johnston

I think that that's where a call comes in. If you've been called to that church, then God is giving you the responsibility to serve that part of his body. I really believe that people ... I used to say that when pastors come to churches, and especially small churches, they need to, from day one, they need to unpack their suitcases. And just approach it from that perspective. Until I'm called away from this church.

And I would suggest that a call is twofold. It's a call to and a call from. You can sense you have a call to another church, but you have that call away from the church you're in. And you're called. That's what it's all about. You're called to love those people and serve those people. And if you don't do that, then you're not being faithful to what God has called you to do.

[00:19:27.400] - Darryl Dash

What would you say to the pastor of a church who might be feeling discouraged right now? What counsel would you give him or what encouragement would you give him?

[00:19:35.380] - Ron Johnston

I think that in broad terms, and with everyone who's discouraged, there's always specific fakes that make them discourage. But I think the first thing I would do is really try and share with them just the reality of the wonder of being used by God.

A pastor's job can be difficult. I've been in it for a long time, and I've gone through my share of really discouraging times, but the rewards are second to none. When you see that young person really get turned on for God, or you see that marriage come back together, or you see that person who started attending your church become a Christian, or whatever it might be, we get to participate in baptisms and weddings and some of the most joyous times that there are. And we do it as part of what God is doing. And we need to see that small church where we are in that light, that God has put me here and God has a plan, and I'm a part of that.

[00:21:00.030] - Darryl Dash

One of the things I know a lot of churches are struggling with is a shortage of pastors. Right now, there just seems to be a clergy shortage, and we're praying about that and working to see our young people challenged to consider pastoral ministry.

But what would you say to a small church that they're just not seeing, maybe they're looking for a pastor and they're just not seeing that anybody's willing to come to their area and take on their ministry? Do you have any encouragement for a church like that?

[00:21:27.210] - Ron Johnston

It's really tough. Here in Ontario, the further you get from Southern Ontario, the less people want to really... I grew up in the north, and so for me, if I went and took a church up in Timmins or someplace, it would be a little bit like going home. I'd be going back to where I, not in Timmins, but to where I grew up. I think that extends to the whole aspect of service. There's fewer, to a great extent, missions is looked on as either a short term two week team or a year or two of my life.

And I find with a lot of pastors that all the pieces need to fit together for them to want to go somewhere. I would say that that church has been looking and from their perspective, I would ask whether there may be too particular on what they're looking for. And I think that happens sometimes. When I was looking for a church one time, I was meeting with a group of this organization had put together a group of prospective pastors together with churches looking for pastors. And all the pastors were young

people out of seminary, and all of the churches were looking for a 45 year old with 20 years experience.

[00:23:02.180] - Ron Johnston

And sometimes we need to drop our expectations down a little bit. And then I would say to a church that, number one, they need to really make it a matter of prayer. And that's maybe the biggest thing that there is there. And then they need to just be... They need to really willing to wait. There's very few really bad pastors in Canada, and there's very few really bad churches, but there's been a lot of bad connections, where the wrong pastor goes to the wrong And you're better to wait that extra bit of time and get the right person, than you are to get somebody right away and then discover. They just don't get who you are at all.

[00:23:57.420] - Darryl Dash

I'm so glad that Ernest White, all those years So I looked at a pile of resumes and saw the resume, the profile of a 23-year-old young guy with very little experience, and said, That's a guy for us. So I'm so grateful that they were willing to look at a guy like me back then.

[00:24:17.250] - Ron Johnston

And you got to work with Ernest for all those years.

[00:24:18.920] - Darryl Dash

I did, which was the greatest privilege of my life. I can't wait to see him again one day in glory. Ron, could you share a story or two about how you've seen Pastors of Small church is encouraged through your ministry?

[00:24:33.910] - Ron Johnston

I think in a broad sense, the retreats that we did, we got so much feedback from those. And primarily the thing that we got back over and over was that they really appreciated something that was designed just for them. I had one guy say to me, he said, Oh, I've

enjoyed it so much not to be at something like this, where some big name pastor is telling me five things I need to do, none of which I could possibly do in my church if I wanted to. And so that for us, that was the thing that just blessed us no end. We had 100 and some people that were at those retreats, and to bless that many was great. A lot of pastors that I've spoken with, and and shared with and that. We probably don't have a lot of stories of spectacular turnarounds for people, but I think that there's quite a few where we've been able to just encourage people to stay where they are and continue in ministry.

[00:25:49.700] - Darryl Dash

Well, that is a massive success in my mind to have somebody who might be on the verge of quitting out of discouragement, just to be encouraged.

And I think of the end of 1 Corinthians where Paul... It's fascinating. I always find it fascinating that at the end of this great chapter on the resurrection, Paul ends with a call to be steadfast and unmovable, to keep abounding in the work of the Lord. And because of the resurrection, to know that our work isn't in vain. So just that encouragement that because of the resurrection somehow, we might be tempted to quit. But even our seemingly insignificant ministries actually matter eternally, which, man, we need that reminder on a regular basis.

Ron, I wanted to ask you a couple of personal questions. You're one of these people that I just sense one of the benefits of talking to you is not just your experience, which has been quite extensive, but it's clear that God has shaped your heart and given you a lot of wisdom to be able to come alongside other pastors. I want to ask you a more personal question. What has God been teaching you these days?

[00:26:59.790] - Darryl Dash

Not not necessarily through a book, but maybe just something that God has been impressing on your life these days.

[00:27:05.190] - Ron Johnston

I think that I've mentioned this several times already, but I read a book a while back by an author by the name of Os Guinness called *The Call*, and he talks about the importance of that in our lives. I've always had that sense that that was true, but that's become stronger stronger. That is just what we need to anchor our lives to in ministry, is that fact that God has called us. And I think maybe the other thing I would mention is just that The important, and I've known this for a long time, but it's just a gain. It's become stronger for me, is just the fact that that relationship with Christ is everything in our lives. And whether it's my devotional time in the morning, whether it's when I'm talking to people, whatever, that that is just what life is all about.

[00:28:12.240] - Darryl Dash

Amen to that. And what has been encouraging you lately?

[00:28:16.340] - Ron Johnston

I have so many encouragements from people that say nice things or do nice things or whatever. And I appreciate every single one of them. I'm not sure that I deserve all of them, but I appreciate all of them. And then just whether through the retreats or... We exist to encourage small church people. And so I love to be able to sit down with small church pastors. And that's the most enjoyable thing I do. This Last Sunday, I spoke at a small church in Hamilton. Then when I went for lunch with the pastor. And it's just so much fun to sit and just to chat with these people. That's what keeps me doing what I'm doing.

[00:29:18.620] - Darryl Dash

Well, I'm grateful for what you're doing. How can people find out more about Small Church Connections in your ministry?

[00:29:24.980] - Ron Johnston

If they go to our website, smallchurchconnections.com, that's the best way. And then I love to talk with a pastor or whatever, and that's on the website. I would invite anyone to give me a call, and we'll sit and chat.

[00:29:43.820] - Darryl Dash

The church is the bride of Christ, and one of the challenges we have is just recognizing the beauty of what God has given us. It often looks so ordinary. And yet, as God sees the church, I think of the words of Francis Schafer who said there's no little people and no little places. And really, if we saw the church as God saw, we'd realize there really is no small church, at least in significance. They might be small in number, but each one matters to God.

So I really appreciate your ministry in reminding us of that. And may God bless you as you encourage small churches and help them.

[00:30:15.720] - Ron Johnston

Thank you so much.