

Hope for the *Left Behind Church*

Is bigger always better? Are numbers the only way to measure success? Not according to Ruth Tucker, author of *Left Behind in a Megachurch World*.

By Sheila Graham

Ruth Tucker grew up in what she refers to as a left-behind church—a little rural church that was the center of activity for her and her friends. “I will carry memories of those spirited times to the grave, whether the free-for-all softball games with the pastor as pitcher or the sultry days of summer Bible camp or the rollicking harvest hayrides or the frigid sledding parties with a bonfire at the top of the hill,” she remembers.

Her little church was established by two missionary ladies back in the 1930s. Tucker wondered if they could have imagined the outcome of their work. “Did they imagine that their little ripple effect—their humble

shouldn’t want to grow, but again the growth should be the right kind of growth. So much of the growth in the megachurches, or the mega-wannabes, comes at the expense of another church.”

Dr. Tucker says that in the arena dominated by megachurches, the most authentic Christian voices may be heard in small congregations. “When I think of authentic Christian voice I’m often thinking of Paul’s reference to ‘When I am weak then I am strong,’ or Jesus’ ‘the first shall be last’ and ‘take up your cross and follow me.’ Yes, we do see in Acts numbers of people who came to the Lord, but when it was the church itself, in the first century especially, we’re looking at small numbers. We’re looking at a rag-tag bunch of disciples living and working in very tenuous times.

“There’s real danger when the church of Christ sees great success. Jesus and Paul warned about that, and we ought to see dangers. That’s not what Jesus was talking about when he spoke the words, ‘follow

thou me’ and ‘come and take up thy cross.’”

But can a church become too small to be

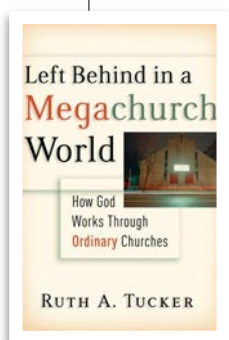
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and often awkward efforts—would nurture sons and daughters whose ministries, vocations and influence have spanned the globe?”

I asked her what she meant by left-behind churches. “The title of the book came out of a class. I realized most of my students would be going out into smaller churches. We hear of wonderful stories of this church and that church doubling in size every four years, but that’s not the rule. I felt it’s important for these young ministers to see that God works in little churches, even churches losing membership, not just the ones holding their own. It doesn’t mean God is not working if the church is not growing or if the church is getting smaller. It also doesn’t mean we

effective? “There are churches of thousands that are too small, too big, too something, to be effective. But small churches have peculiar problems that other churches do not have. Being able to provide for a minister is always an issue, and so is having a facility or location. But you can have a wonderful group of a dozen or two dozen, three dozen people who are vibrant Christians reaching out to the neighborhood.”

Yes, but what about those churches where many of their members don’t live in the neighborhood where the church is located? “That’s unfortunate,” Tucker said, “If you are a little neighborhood church and you have 36 people, you’re a lot bigger than the church of 36 spread all over three counties. A church so spread





out has to transition into becoming a neighborhood church. Whether it's a rental property or whatever it is, get your base in that community. How good it would be if this church of 36 expanded so some of its members could start a group of eight or so in their towns, with the church still maintaining the 36 people and pulling in people from the neighborhood.

“A wonderful student of mine was involved in a little left-behind church where nothing was happening. Then a woman in their church was called by a neighbor to help out some relatives who lived in a mobile home park. One after another this family and their friends got connected to the church. Within a month or two the church had doubled in size with people with tattoos and bandanas coming on motorcycles and in beat-up trucks. That church was revitalized with everyone so excited because they've got more people coming.

“We've got to put roots down in a neighborhood and do it the way Jesus did. That is 'come follow me.' When we are way too small to get involved in large projects by ourselves, we've got to get people in the neighborhood involved in humanitarian outreach programs. There are people out there who really would like to have opportunities to help and work.”

If you're part of a small congregation, or large, whether pastor or member, you'll find *Left Behind in a Megachurch World* well-researched and full of encouraging and inspiring examples of how God works through ordinary churches to accomplish the extraordinary. ●



Dr. Tucker is an author, lecturer, and former associate professor of missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. *Left Behind in a Megachurch World*, Baker Publishing Group, 2006.