

Amy Steele

THE SERENDIPITOUS JOYS OF A SMALL TOWN CHURCH

OUR KIND OF CHURCH

In March 2003, my husband, Chris, took a new position at a Christian camp in central Minnesota. Our journey to that camp was divinely hilarious, full of huge neon arrows from God that could not be mistaken by our extended families, our friends, or even ourselves. In faith we followed those arrows, moving from east Texas to the frozen north. It was a whirlwind adventure, happening so fast that we didn't have time to ponder many of the changes we would be facing.

Finding a new church home was one of the biggest changes we encountered. From the beginning, we knew we would have to adjust our expectations. Before the cross-country move-a-whirl, we had been members of a megachurch where the membership consisted mainly of younger families. There were six gifted pastors with varying responsibilities. Each week was filled with great teaching and incredible worship led by professional musicians. Starbucks coffee and Krispy Kreme doughnuts were served after each of the four weekend services. It was a very hip community of believers and we liked it. It was immensely satisfying and easy to be part of that church.

Well, megachurches are pretty rare in this part of rural Minnesota, where most churches fall into one of two denominations, Lutheran or Catholic—and we were neither.

Visiting local churches was discour-

aging. We knew God had called us to our new place and Chris relished his new job. We were having fun exploring our adopted state. But the church thing? To be honest, we were homesick for “our kind” of church.

We visited Community Covenant Church in Upsala several times. We knew little about the Covenant denomination, having grown up in the Bible Belt where they are rare. (What is a Pietist, anyway?) I come from a very conservative background so I had deep theological concerns. It was difficult for me to consider attending a church that had the potential to call a woman as pastor. Infant baptism was quite a stumbling block as well, in the beginning. I am still working through those and other issues, determining what is God's word and what is my own dogma.

Both of us were also somewhat leery of the small size of the church as well as the schedule. The traditional services and a separate Sunday-school time meant that our rambunctious preschoolers would attend worship with us for the first time in their lives. They had always gone to a special children's program time before. We knew it would be a big adjustment for them and worried about the rest of congregation's reaction to their wiggles and noises.

There were hymnals in the pews as well. I hadn't sung from a hymnal in years—and I liked it that way! In many ways it felt like a return to the churches

of my childhood, and I wrestled with the implications of that feeling. Was I moving backwards in my faith walk by returning to a traditional church? Would I lose some ability to relate to nonbelievers? Could I learn some of those funky Scandinavian melodies in the hymnal?

But both Chris and I loved the warmth and authenticity that we sensed from the moment we walked in the door. The pastor was kind and thoughtful. Involvement was a hallmark of the congregation. It was a vibrant church, an interesting mix of generational families and newcomers like us. We attended the potential members class, and discussed our concerns with the pastor. Several of our new co-workers at camp attended that Covenant church; their relationship with Christ had resonated with us. We finally made the decision to join the church.

It has been three years now since we joined. Becoming part of a small community has brought us unexpected blessings. I can't speak for Chris, but I know this for myself: I may not have Starbucks and doughnuts, but I am finding a more profound intimacy with our small community of believers. That community is precious to me here, a long way from my home.

Sitting in the service today, I was thankful for that gift. I know the family who was singing behind me. They have waded through deep waters lately, trying not to drown, clinging to God.



The Steele family—Amy, Chris, Jack, and Olivia—in front of Community Covenant Church in Upsala, Minnesota

The words that came from their lips weren't just words, they poured from their hearts.

When our pastor spoke, I know he had prayed for us, as well as met many needs of this congregation in tangible ways. I know he has to be all things to all congregants. I don't know how he has had time to get a sermon together. Yet it was there, God's word, and all the more precious because our pastor has been actively caring for his congregation while seeking what God might have for our ears and hearts.

The lay leader who introduced the service had a quiet demeanor but he kept us moving along very nicely. He's the one that donates his vacation and resources to lead a mission trip to a Jamaican orphanage every year. Some of the youth led the singing, their sweet untrained voices rising from their hearts. I substitute at their high school and know what they deal with on a daily basis. I silently pray my kids will be able to shine for Christ like they do.

Three rows back, my friend stood with her autistic son as he shouted and

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clapped, worshipping God with joy. I smiled at the elegant woman on my right. We are in very different stages of life. It's likely I wouldn't have had the opportunity to know her well had we attended a larger church together. Yet here I have worked beside her to feed and comfort a grieving family at a funeral. That is an intimate task, making strangers into sisters quickly.

I looked down at my son holding a hymnal. He is learning to read music, and learning deep truths of God from the liturgy. I had an arm around my daughter, who has at long last learned to sit quietly most of the time and listen in church. I hope this will prepare her to listen quietly for God someday. Chris sat with me today, not tending to needs of campers as he often does on

Sunday mornings. I was thankful for this place, for these people who have loved us and welcomed us in when we were strangers from far off.

Is this congregation perfect? No, and sometimes our size can exacerbate the flaws we each have, causing conflict. Any wound seems large when a body is small. But overall, there is love thrumming through the group. I look at the faces of those around me and I know their stories, and they know mine. We have broken bread together at potlucks, served side-by-side in capacities both joyful and sorrowful.

In all honesty I still miss my big hustle-bustle megachurch sometimes, but I have gained great joy in knowing and being known in a smaller community. These brothers and sisters in Christ have graciously let my family into their lives. In coming to the Covenant, my faith has not receded, it has expanded in ways I couldn't have anticipated.

And the coffee isn't too bad, either. □

Amy Steele is a member of Community Covenant Church in Upsala, Minnesota.