

# Solidly Reformed, Strikingly Small

March 4, 2013

Here in Brazil the majority of Reformed and conservative pastors have small congregations, from 80 to 120 members. This fact is well known and has often been leveraged as criticism against Reformed doctrine. *If Reformed theology is so biblical and good, the thinking goes, why can't its preachers and defenders convince people? Why do so few attend their churches? And why can't these churches grow or get many young people to attend their services?*

I know Reformed churches in Brazil that are dynamic, growing, evangelistic, missions-minded, and relatively large. But they are exceptions. By “small churches” I'm referring not only to size but also to vision and involvement in evangelism and missions. I have in mind churches that have stayed small for a long time. In some cases, they're even losing members. This bothers me because it's happening in a country where millions are becoming “evangelicals,” where there's significant freedom of speech and religion, and where the soil is fertile and the doors open for gospel proclamation.

Though I am myself a Reformed pastor, I'd like to make six brief observations on this worrisome trend.

1. By rejecting the idea that, in terms of church growth, the numbers don't say everything, many of us forget they say something. Can we really say it's okay for a Reformed congregation to grow 1 percent in the last 20 years—a much lower growth rate than the population in Brazil and even its evangelical churches? In a country where evangelicals aren't persecuted by the state and the opportunities are wide open before us?

2. Equally unfortunate is the attitude that justifies the tiny size with the argument of God's sovereignty. Clearly, as a Reformed believer I understand it is God who gives the growth ([1 Cor. 3:6-7](#)). But I also believe that before we place any “respectful blame” on him, we should ask ourselves a few questions:

- Is our church well located?
- Is the service warm and inviting?
- Has the church developed frequent and consistent efforts to gain new members?
- Is preaching aimed directly to convert sinners?
- Is it intelligible to any unbeliever who happens to be there?
- Are church members aware and ready to use all opportunities—and even create them—to witness to unbelievers?

- Is there spirited prayer for the conversion of sinners and church growth?

I fear many Reformed pastors blame God's sovereignty before doing their homework.

Why would God want Reformed congregations to be uniquely small, to fail to thrive in a free country where other evangelical churches are growing dramatically? Did God predestine such churches to be doctrinally correct but tiny in size, and the others to grow despite unfaithful theology and methodology? Has he not predestined Reformed pastors to be soul winners, evangelists, church planters, and heralds of the kingdom?

3. Perhaps the problem with many of us conservative pastors is that we aren't open to changes in our services, attitudes, and postures—however small—in order to show a more friendly face to people. Being warm, inviting, attractive, and interesting isn't a sin and doesn't contradict Reformed confessions. Reformed pastors need to think of ways to make their church grow rather than simply rationalizing that “small is beautiful.”

It's true many evangelical churches grow through the use of questionable strategies and methodologies that attract people with promises of material blessings and healings that cannot be fulfilled. To criticize these churches' size and point out their theological and methodological errors, however, don't justify our tiny Reformed churches. What prevents us from laboring with faithful methods to be large churches?

4. What scares me most is the proud way some small-congregation pastors quote Jesus' teaching that “many are called but few are chosen.” “True believers are few,” they say. “I'd rather have a small church with solid members than a huge, crowded, superficial, and self-serving congregation.” Well, if I had to choose between the two I'd prefer the little one as well. But why must there be a choice between the two? Is it possible to have Reformed churches brimming with people who are there for the right reasons?

5. Reformed pastors generally tend to consider sound doctrine the most important aspect of church life. But in our quest to reinforce certain truths, I fear we give undue attention to others such as biblical spirituality, prayer, and planned evangelism. I believe doctrine should always be evangelistic, and evangelism should always be doctrinal. “Preaching,” as Charles Spurgeon put it, “is theology coming out of lips on fire.”

Some Reformed pastors feel so hamstrung by the doctrine of total depravity that they don't know how to invite sinners to trust Christ. The ghost of Charles Finney, popularizer of the altar call, haunts and torments them; they reach the end of their message without a clue how to apply it to the lost—lest they give the impression they're making an altar call. They also fear being too animated lest they look like Pentecostals. However, I believe if Reformed preachers looked more human, natural, and comfortable in the pulpit, they'd elicit greater interest.

6. I think, finally, that in reacting against the excesses of Pentecostalism, many Reformed pastors are fearful of praying too much and seeking great spiritual revival in their churches.

I have no easy solutions for the ecclesiastical dwarfism of Reformed congregations. However, I do believe we need genuine spiritual brokenness among pastors—to humble ourselves before God, to probe our lives and ministries, to seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and to desire God's glory above all else.

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***Editors' Note:*** Lopes will be leading a workshop on “[Why the World Needs the Gospel](#)” at [The Gospel Coalition 2013 Missions Conference](#) on Sunday, April 7. Additionally, there will be a special gathering of leaders and workers from Brazil on Monday, April 8, at the [National Conference](#). This event will be hosted by Bill Walsh, TGC director of international outreach, and Rick Denham, executive director of Editora FIEL. If you're from Brazil or engaged in ministry there, we invite you to join us for an informal time of encouragement and networking. We will meet at 9 p.m. in Suwannee Rooms 18-21. [You can still register for this rapidly approaching five-day event](#). All main sessions will be translated into Portuguese. We'll see you in Orlando!

**Augustus Nicodemus Gomes Lopes** is a Presbyterian minister, theologian, professor, international conference speaker, and bestselling author. Augustus holds a BA in theology from North Presbyterian Seminary in Recife, Brazil, a ThM in New Testament from the Reformed University of Potchefstroom, South Africa, and a PhD in biblical interpretation from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is also an associate pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Santo Amaro in São Paulo.