

## When Is A Large Church "Smaller" Than A Small Church ?

Rev. Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News*, December 8, 2003

"My Large Church is Smaller Than Your Fellowship" is the title of a workshop the Rev. Stefan Jonasson gave April 3, 2004, at the Center for Cultural Value's "Spiritual Growth Through Small Group Ministry" event at our church in Arlington, VA.

"One paradox about large churches is that they become large by 'doing small' better than small congregations do," Jonasson writes, adding, "It's obvious that Covenant Groups offer opportunities for intimacy and depth in congregations where it is no longer possible for everybody to know your name."

I have become aware of the web page of Gary Portnoy ([www.garyportnoy.com](http://www.garyportnoy.com)), who co-wrote that familiar theme song with Judy Hart Angelo, and I had carefully written out some of its words because I think they have so much to say about our reasons for being evangelical about Small Group Ministry.

Here are some of the lyrics, reprinted [in *Covenant Group News*] with Portnoy's permission:

Making your way in the world today  
Takes everything you've got. Taking a  
break from all your worries Sure would  
help a lot.

Sometimes you wanna go Where  
everybody knows your name And they're  
always glad you came. You wanna be  
where you can see Our troubles are all  
the same You wanna be where everybody  
knows your name.

On his web site, Portnoy tells about how the song came about and the surprising response it got from people everywhere, including piano teachers and choral groups wanting the sheet music. A recording of the song was played on radio and its popularity, some

people think, may have helped save "Cheers," which got off to a very slow start in its first season, in 1982.

Perhaps the song even helped to save Portnoy's own mother. Struggling with alcoholism, she finally got the courage to attend a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was held in a church. After everyone had settled into folding chairs, the AA leader asked people to join in singing a song that, he said, had become the first order of business at all their meetings. It was the Cheers theme song. She began her first-ever AA meeting by singing words written by her own son: "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got..."

The web page's author says: "Gary began to realize that he had written a song that was anything but an homage to a smoke-filled tavern. He gratefully embraced the reality that the Cheers theme was about something far more universal and central to life than beer!!! It became evident to him that 'Where Everybody Knows Your Name' had tapped into the basic human need to be connected, to love, to be loved, to belong ... and to belong to something bigger than oneself."

Exactly. And these are the most basic needs we seek to address through offering Covenant Groups as a fundamental part of our churches and fellowships. People in AA meetings are, sometimes, fighting for their very lives. So, sometimes, are people who come through the front doors of our churches.

And even those of us currently in less-dire straits share with everyone else the need to know, to be known, and to be connected to each other, our world, and that which is beyond the visible spectrum.