

A photograph of a stone church building with a large arched window and a cross on the roof. A flowering tree with white and pink blossoms is in the foreground on the right.

## Weekly Newsletter: 18 February 2025

### Reflection: How to Be a Member of an “Awkward-Sized” Church

By Joe Barnard

There is a popular book among church leaders, *Ready, Steady, Grow*. Perhaps the most insightful part of the book is the beginning section where the writer, Ray Evans, assesses the strengths and weaknesses of different sized congregation. His diagnosis is disturbingly accurate.

Medium-sized churches consist of between 50-150 people. In many ways, this is a blissful state of being. In a group of this size, people know each other's names; new people are recognised and warmly greeted; Sunday services are sufficiently large to feel like an event but intimate enough to not feel lost; the head pastor is accessible and can function like a personal chaplain to everyone; and people who care can be up-to-speed with most of the news (gossip?) in the church.

In case anyone has trouble connecting dots, HEC matches this description point-on-point.

Now, “medium-sized” churches, when vibrant, suffer from what I call the “puppy” problem. Everyone loves puppies; they attract a lot of attention. But the problem with a puppy is that its growth cannot be stunted. The adorable, little Rottweiler will steady inflate into something that looks less like a stuffed-bear than a real one.

Something similar is true of healthy churches of 100+ people. Their warmth, welcome, and care is magnetic. But this means that such churches cannot stay the same size forever. Inevitably, like a puppy, they will grow, and as they do, some of their most likeable traits will disappear.

Evans describes this next phase of church life as the discomfort of being an “awkward-sized” church. Such congregations are too big for everyone to know each other's names; they begin to feel a bit more like a crowd than a family gathering; new visitors often feel detached from the “centre” of the fellowship; the pastor feels less accessible; and very few people can know most of what is going on in the church.

In case anyone has trouble connecting dots, HEC is beginning to experience the birth pangs of no longer being a medium-sized church.

This leads to an important question: what does it look like to be a faithful member of an “awkward-sized” church? This is something for each one of us to reflect on. The truth is that each one of us contributes something important to the culture and shared life of the congregation. If we want to stay strong and united

as we grow, this is not something the session can cement by itself. Instead, we all need to take responsibility for the small, but significant role we have in making sure that HEC feels more like a loving body than a lonely crowd.

### **1 – Never Lose Your Enthusiasm for Church Growth**

Christians in stagnant churches love to daydream about new people coming in; however, it's not unusual for these same people to begin to complain once new people, with new problems, begin to disrupt the status quo. We like the thought of a balcony filled with young faces; we just don't like the noise of young feet pounding in the church hall.

Now, let's be honest and admit two things. One is that there is something enjoyable about a church being a closed circle. It's comfortable to look around on Sunday and only see faces that you would happily invite to Christmas dinner. That said, let's also admit that Jesus never permits us to live in a comfort-zone. His call is to go to the highways and byways in order that the festal halls of the church may be filled with the most unexpected of people. Nothing in the gospels indicates that Jesus wants spare seats in his churches. Jesus loves a table filled, and He summons us to make space for the children, tax collectors, and sinners who will inevitably bring more disruption than noise into our shared life.

What does this mean for us? If Jesus rejoices in a full church, let's maintain the same spirit. Like groomsmen, let's celebrate all of the things that put a smile on the groom's face.

### **2 – Help People Find the “Centre”**

There is a centre circle at HEC. This “centre” is not defined by length of tenure or theological IQ. It's a community thing. People at the “centre” are those who participate in the core practices of our church family. In other words, that are not just present on Sunday mornings, they are members of a home group, and they attend (as able) the prayer meeting. For us, these practices are the equivalent of a family sitting around a table for a meal: they reaffirm and strengthen the bonds of peace. At the point a person is present at these midweek meetings, she is no longer a detached spectator of our church life. She is now on the field with us, toiling in intercessory prayer and shouldering the burdens of other members.

Now, the problem is that new people can feel that there is a “centre” in our congregation, but they are uncertain how to move toward it. This is why it often feels to visitors as if there is an “old” Holyrood and a “new” Holyrood. They can tell that there is a deeper way of being involved in the life of the church; they just aren't sure what this “life” consists of or how to become a partner in it.

This is where older members can be of help. The best way to draw people into the core practices of Holyrood is not to mention the prayer meeting in the intimations or to hand out welcome cards for home groups. The very best way is personal invitations. We need older members to guide repeat visitors to the middle of our common life.

### **3 – Look for Opportunities to Give Up a Seat**

There is only one profanity that I've heard in church. In fact, I've heard it repeatedly throughout my time as a pastor. I've listened to it whispered in the pews of Highland churches; I've watched it silently spoken with gestures in big, American congregations. The blasphemy is this: “You're sitting in my seat!”

We forget how awkward it is to show up as the new kid among an old group of friends. Imagine stepping on a bus in which all of the passengers were from the same village *except you*. Sheepishly, you look for an

obscure seat – not too far back or too close to the driver. Finding one, you look down at your phone to avoid being conspicuous. Then, someone walks up, gets your attention, and says, “Could you move; you’re sitting in my seat!”

How would you feel? Embarrassed? Upset? Alone?

Let’s resolve to never forget how much courage people show in choosing to visit a new church. But let’s do more: whenever possible, let’s give up a seat to make a visitor feel at home among us. After all, we come to church to worship the king who gave up his seat of righteousness so that sinners could find a home in heaven.

## Men’s Rugby Event – this Saturday

Come along on **Saturday 22 February** to watch some of the Six Nations. Arrive at HEC for 4:30pm, 4:45pm kick off and pizza + drinks provided. Contact Sam for more details ([sampeterallen@gmail.com](mailto:sampeterallen@gmail.com))

## Joe’s Canada Trip

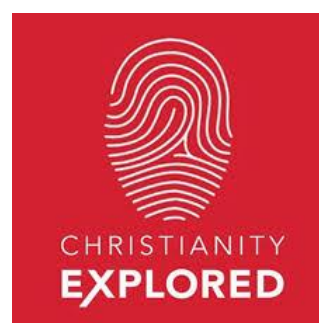
Joe leaves for Canada this Thursday to speak at a Men’s Retreat and will be away until the following Thursday (27 February). We’re thankful to Neil Longwe from the Merchant City Church Plant who will take our service on Sunday morning and to Jon Gemmell who will be continuing our studies in 1 Samuel in the evening.

For any pastoral matters when Joe’s away, please speak to one of the elders or your Home Group leaders.

## Christianity Explored – Sunday 23 February

Based on Mark’s gospel, Christianity Explored is a relaxed and informal way of sharing the best news you can ever hear, and gives people space and time to think about the big questions of life.

We’re starting a course for seven weeks from **Sunday 23 February** at **5-6pm** in the church. If you’ve got questions about the Christian faith or are a new Christian, then this course is for you. Come along and bring your friends!



## Women’s Discipleship at Holyrood

Thank you to everyone who came along to the breakfast on Saturday, it was a great morning and we’re thankful to Lorna for sharing with us. There are three dates for your diaries going forward –

- **This Thursday:** will be the last study in our series on Navigating Gospel Truth. It’s been a joy to work through these studies together and come along at 10.30am for our last one!
- **Online studies:** Starting on **Tuesday 4 March** we’re going to do four Bible Studies in the last couple of chapters of Luke’s gospel as we prepare our hearts for Easter. We’ll meet on Zoom from 7-8pm with time for prayer in small groups, please join us if you can.

- **Women's Conference:** We're excited to be planning a half day conference from 9.30am to 12.45pm on **Saturday 24 May** with Sarah Allen. The main session will be on 'Understanding Eve' and we'll look at what it means to be a woman in our modern world. There will be a couple of seminar options as well as coffee and the chance to spend time together. We're hoping to open this conference up to women from other churches so spread the word!

## OMF Prayer Meetings



Did you know that there are two groups that meet to pray for the work of OMF (Overseas Missionary Fellowship) International? Lorna and James serve with this organisation in Japan and Singapore respectively!

One group meets at Susan Holloway's home on the second Monday of the month (contact [sholloway86@btinternet.com](mailto:sholloway86@btinternet.com) if you're interested in attending). The second group meets online with Warner and Sheena Hardie on the third Monday of each month (contact Warner [hwhardie@gmail.com](mailto:hwhardie@gmail.com) for more details).

## 'As I See It' - An Audience with John Lennox (Online Event)

We are invited to an evening online with Professor Lennox on **Monday 3 March 2025** at 7.30pm. He'll share his experience of being a practising Christian in a lifetime representing and defending the truth claims of Christianity. Topics will range from the future of Christianity in the Western world, and the beauty of mathematics with its powerful pointers to a mind behind the universe, to the practicalities of how we should expect a personal relationship with God to work.

There will be opportunities to ask questions and to register for a place contact [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org)

## Church Calendar

For your info and prayers:

- Wednesday: Prayer Meeting at 7pm (refreshments from 6.45pm) and online.
- Thursday: Men's and Women's Bible Studies at 10.30am in the church
- Sunday:
  - Morning service at 10.30am – Neil Longwe preaching (live streamed)
  - Christianity Explored from 5-6pm in the church
  - Evening service at 6pm – Jon Gemmell preaching (live streamed)
- Monday:
  - Baby & Toddlers Group 10am – 11.30am
  - Warm Space 12 noon to 3pm



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