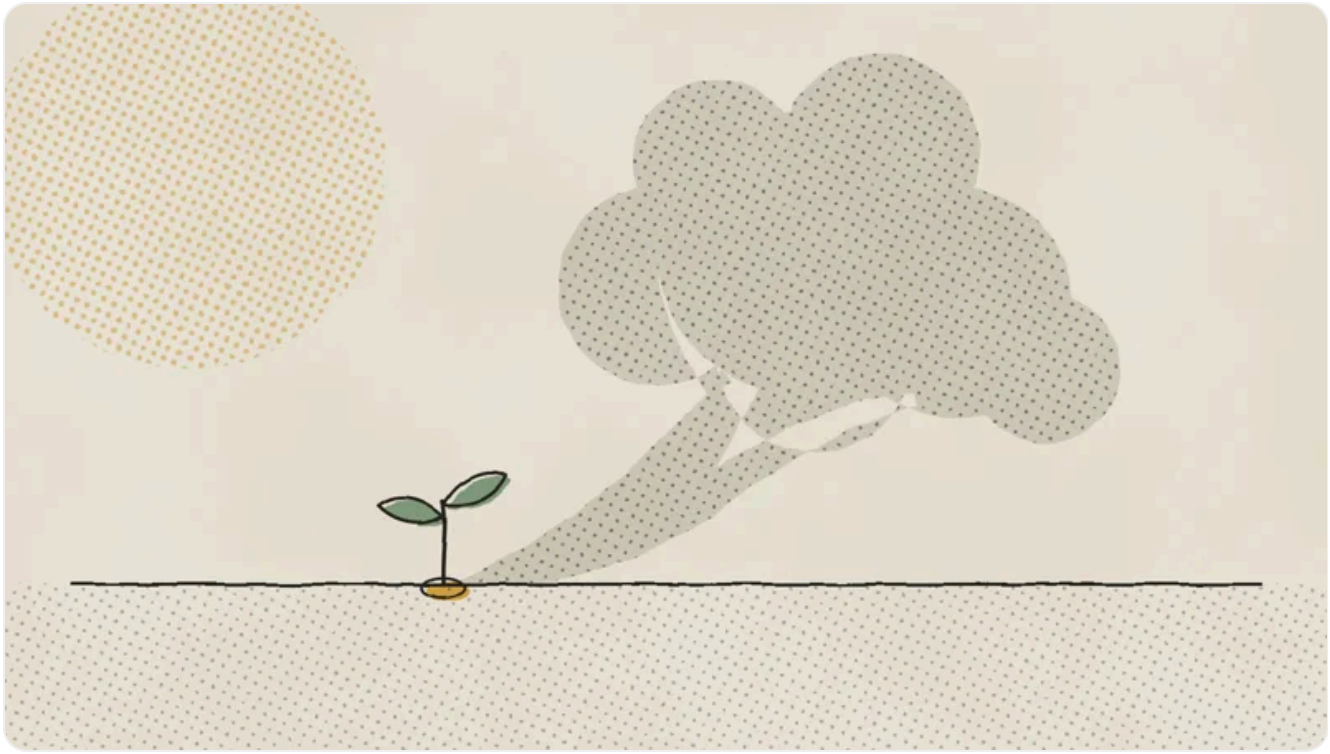
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Why God Always Starts Small.

By Andy Crouch · Shared by Tommy Lee



Andy Crouch wrote this blog article for us over ten years ago when Resource Global first started. I wanted to share that article with you.

By Andy Crouch

Maybe Chicago natives get used to it, but I'm always a bit awestruck whenever I'm in Chicago, a city of gloriously monumental scale, set on the edge of a vast lake, its lights stretching out for miles in a grid that reaches almost to the horizon.

Human beings, at least modern, American human beings, like things big. Resource Global's annual partner meeting in 2015 took place at the impressive U.S. Cellular Field, home of the Chicago White Sox, a ballpark so huge, Cubs fans will be quick to note, it wasn't even full during that team's World Series winning season. There was an undeniable sense of awe as we walked in through the gates and looked up at the towering walls that surround the baseball diamond.

But there's a funny thing about our human love of big things. God, at least according to the Bible, doesn't seem to share it. At least not at first.

The story of the Bible begins with two, just two, human beings made in God's image. When their descendants finally achieve what the business world calls "scale" and seek to build a tower with its top in the heavens (sounds a lot like a skyscraper!), God confounds their speech and scatters them (Gen. 11), and his very next move is to start a worldwide redemptive project with a single couple who are too old for children (Gen. 12).

God promises that couple that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15), but when he leads the people of Israel out of the empire of Egypt, they are a tiny, beleaguered band of ex-slaves whom even God describes as "the smallest of the nations" (Deut. 7). When, after decades of wandering and conflict, they are settled in the Promised Land, they are a speck on the map of the Ancient Near East, subject to predatory empires in every direction: Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and eventually Rome.

And then when God mounts the ultimate rescue operation for his own chosen people and his whole sin-infested cosmos, the Anointed One begins life as a baby and then grows up to wander around by foot with a dozen apostles, plus two sisters and a brother (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) who seem to be his dearest friends. Even after the astonishing turnaround of his resurrection, ascension, and the gift of his Spirit, with several thousand coming to faith in one day, the church is so marginal that it doesn't even figure in the reports of Roman bureaucrats until the end of the first century.

God just doesn't seem to have a problem with starting small.

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>
> — ANDY CROUCH

And the more I've thought about this, the more I think that the reason God doesn't mind starting small is that small is the only way to start, if what you are seeking is truly transformational creativity.

In a world that dreams of making it big, there's something enduringly important about very small groups of people.

Consider the baseball teams that play at U.S. Cellular Field. At any given time, there are only nine men on the field playing defense, one to four players for the offense (plus two coaches), with another couple dozen in each dugout. There may be 30,000 fans watching the game, but only a handful of people are playing it.

And this is how it must be, with baseball and every other sport. Imagine a 20-person baseball team. It's just barely possible to conceive (though if outfielders tend to run into one another now, imagine if there were twice as many!). But a 100-person baseball team is inconceivable. A one-thousand-person baseball team? Laughable. The only way to play baseball is with an absolutely small group of people.

Only absolutely small groups can sustain coordinated diverse action, where each individual plays a different part, but the parts combine harmoniously in a single whole. And coordinated diverse action is the most fruitful kind of human action, the kind that commands the most respect and has the deepest power to bring change.

Human beings are in fact astonishingly diverse. From our genetic makeup, to our personal histories, to our cultural heritages, we are inescapably individuals, even identical twins, who share the same exact DNA, express that DNA in subtly or significantly different ways. At the same time, we are made for coordinated action. Individuals can accomplish very little on their own. Only absolutely small groups allow both of these qualities to be expressed to their fullest: on the one hand, the flawless coordination of a major league double play, and on the other hand, the unique assignment of roles, from shortstop to right fielder, that perfectly match each individual's gifts.

Of course, you can coordinate action on a far larger scale than a baseball team. Roughly 156,000 Allied troops landed on the shores on Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944, with millions more supporting them. But such massive coordinated operations inevitably require uniformity from their participants, and, in the case of military operations, literal uniforms. And that uniformity requires, to a greater or lesser extent, ignoring, suppressing, or sacrificing the individual uniqueness of those participants. Men and women in such coordinated uniform action must sacrifice their full identity, and sometimes their lives, to such operations, and their greatest and most distinctive gifts therefore are neglected or underutilized.

Every empire dreams of massive, large-scale, coordinated uniform action. And throughout history various empires have achieved extraordinary scale, not just military empires like Rome, the World War II Axis and Allied powers, and the United States and China today, but also commercial empires like McDonald's and Walmart. But such action is never, strictly speaking, creative action. To engage in significant creativity requires tapping into the deepest capacities of human beings. Only coordinated diverse action can do that.

You could put it this way: empires dream of social machines, with countless human beings playing rigidly assigned and repetitive parts, but God has a different dream. The divine Trinity, after all, is an absolutely small group in which each person plays a distinct part, none reducible to another; and yet God acts in perfect harmony. God's dream is not a machine but a family, reflected in the revelation of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit. Somehow families can accomplish things that even armies and corporations cannot.

If you really care about cultural transformation, you'll start small, with a group of people who can know and trust one another deeply. To be sure, such transformation can't stay small if it's going to have wide effects. But at the beginning, when the most extraordinary creative work is done, the number of people in the room is always small so that each one can contribute their absolutely greatest capacities in an environment of maximum trust.

This makes the case, it seems to me, for a particularly risky and particularly fruitful kind of investment, the kind that Resource Global specializes in: coming alongside teams of innovators who are still small enough to be able to be deeply creative, and helping them build the systems, skills, and organizational culture that will allow their vision to grow.

It's easy to invest in efforts that have already reached a reliable level of scale, but it's also less rewarding. As exciting as a crowd of 45,000 baseball fans can be, their cultural capacity is oddly limited. About the most complex thing you can get them to do together is "the wave."

But nine people on a field, on a good night, intensively disciplined, intimately familiar with each other's every movement and thought, committed to one another and the game? That's something worth celebrating, and worth investing in. And God's relentless commitment to the small, local, and family-like, at every turn of redemptive history, suggests that efforts that start small can end up transforming the world.

Andy Crouch

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Andy Crouch wrote this article for Resource Global. Tommy Lee shares it here on tommyplee.ai.

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