

18
The Rural Mindset
Randy Cantrell

20
**The Rural Reality
of Poverty**
Steve Donaldson

23
**Leaving the City to
Plant in a Small Town**
Charlie Cotherman

24
On Pastoring the Rural
Paul Jorgensen

26
America's 15%
Leith Anderson

Evangelicals

Magazine | Fall 2017 | Vol. 3 No. 2



The Thriving Rural Church

Martin Giese

FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

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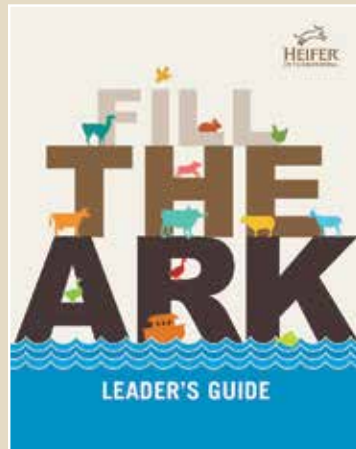
A TIME TO GIVE

These **FREE**, hands-on resources can help you transform hearts in your own church while helping to end hunger and poverty worldwide.



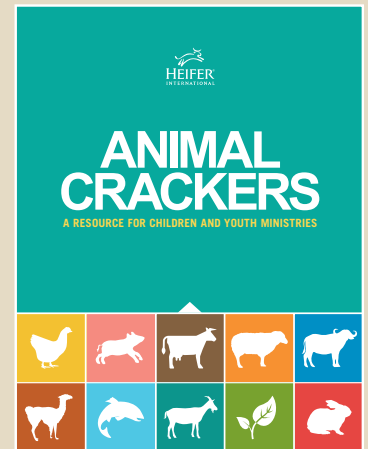
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Also in This Issue

- 6 Comment**
The church in China grows, and the rate of marriages in the United States declines.
- 9 Calendar**
Here's your guide to compelling evangelical events.
- 10 Worth Noting**
Supreme Court decision is a win for religious freedom, and evangelicals advocate for foreign aid.
- 12 Small Town, Small Church, Small Salary**
The majority of pastors and their spouses suffer in silence over financial challenges.

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CONTEXT



Just look at a 2016 election map by counties, and you'll see the urban-rural divide is real — blue dots concentrate in urban centers and red dots cover the rural. The election of President Trump caught many by surprise, with news reporters and political pundits scratching their heads about rural America.

For us, it's not about politics, it's about people. And American rural counties include 46.2 million people, or 15 percent of the U.S. population. But, maybe it's also time for evangelicals to pause and consider: What do we know about rural America? How are our fellow pastors and churches doing in these areas? Have we overlooked rural areas as we've focused on urban church planting? In wanting to see ministry programs flourish in the suburbs, have we ignored those farther out? With our desire for big, have we forgotten the small?

As Martin Giese points out in this issue's cover article (p. 14), there are ample strategic reasons for evangelicals to put leadership, resources and vision into rural church ministry. He even makes the claim that if we want to reach the world for Christ, we need to invest in rural communities.

Rural America has its own culture. Those in rural America may have more in common with others in rural communities across the country (or world!) than they do with those who live in cities in their same state. Church planting in rural America isn't the same as it is in urban areas. Pastoring in small towns presents unique challenges that suburban pastors don't often face.

Denominational leaders, pastors and other evangelical leaders need to become experts in knowing and interpreting communities. Just as foreign missionaries must learn the language and customs of those they go to reach, so American church leaders must learn the language and customs of those we are called to reach. We are called to reach those to the ends of the earth. Certainly, the rural is included there.

The Church in China

“The enormous and rapid movement of rural populations into urban areas is growing house churches beyond what anyone anticipated. The variety of churches, circumstances, rules and personalities among a people four times the population of the United States makes it almost impossible to cover even the most basic of its spiritual realities, church-related groups and patterns of ministry. What goes on in China matters to the Church worldwide; soon, it will be the country with the largest Christian population and, in time, it might have the world’s largest missionary force.”

Brian Stiller, global ambassador of the World Evangelical Alliance, in *Christianity Today*



Testifying Before Congress

“As a Christian, I believe that all individuals are made in the image of God and are worthy of dignity and respect, regardless of their religious beliefs. I believe that as a Christian, that’s how I should treat all individuals.”

Russell Vought during his confirmation hearing for deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget

Look After Singles

“The author of the Book of James encourages Christians to ‘look after orphans and widows’ (James 1:27). Although contemporary single women (divorcees, never-marrieds and widows) don’t face the same travails as first-century widows, nonetheless many of us experience significant financial instability, vocational disruption and other notable challenges. In that sense, we need the Church to come alongside us in a similar spirit.”

Gina Dalfonzo, author of “One by One: Welcoming Singles into Your Church”

Refugees Benefit Bottom Line

“By the time refugees who entered the U.S. as adults have been here for 20 years, they will have paid, on average, \$21,000 more in taxes to all levels of government than they received in benefits over that time span, according to a working paper released Monday by the National Bureau of Economic Research that examined the economic and social outcomes of refugees in the U.S.”

Tracy Jan, reporter for *The Washington Post*

Evangelicals emphasize evangelism, and pastors often avoid controversies that might take priority over the gospel message. Most pastors I know don’t want to endorse politicians. They want to focus on teaching the Bible.

Leith Anderson, NAE president



I agree with @leithanderson — “Our national generosity makes me proud to be an American.” #foreignaidchat
Rich Stearns @RichStearns



The Decline of Marriages

“ The growing marriage divide is driven in large part by four developments. First, men without college degrees have seen their real wages decline and spells of unemployment increase, both of which make them less attractive as marriage partners. Second, changes in public policy and law have made marriage less financially advantageous, especially for lower-income Americans who often face marriage penalties associated with a range of means-tested policies offered by the federal government.

Third, the erosion of marriage-related norms governing sex, childbearing, and marital permanence, along with the rise of a soul-mate model of marriage that increases men and women’s expectations for high-quality marriages, has left lower-income Americans more vulnerable to premarital childbearing, family instability and divorce — partly because they face fewer opportunity costs for having children out of wedlock, and partly because they face more economic stresses that can undercut the quality of their marriages. Finally, civic participation has fallen most among Americans without college degrees; this matters because civic groups — especially religious organizations — have long lent moral and social support to marriage and family life.”

Brad Wilcox, senior fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, during a committee meeting of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine



Meal-time Prayer

“ [Praying before a meal is] a powerful way of reminding yourself that you are not self-sufficient, that you are living by somebody’s grace, that plenty of other people who work just as hard as you don’t have anything to eat.”

Timothy Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, in *The Washington Post*

A Solid Rock

“ We need to change the way in which we see rural towns. This takes spending time in the community while praying for an open heart and a clear mind from any predetermined views we might carry. We need to stop seeing small church, small town as a stepping stone but instead as a solid rock to build the house of the Lord.”

Wes Holland, administrator for the Rural Matters Institute at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism in *The Exchange*



JUSTICE DECLARATION

#iSigned the #JusticeDeclaration because every human being is made in the image of God, with a life worthy of respect, protection, and care.

Have **YOU** signed yet?

#iSigned the #JusticeDeclaration because I believe in criminal justice reform that is restorative, just, and fair.

#iSigned the #JusticeDeclaration because it is grounded in biblical values.

#iSigned because I have done prison ministry for 20 years. Anyone can be transformed!

#iSigned because 2.7 million children have a parent in prison. I can't sit on the sidelines.

ADD YOUR NAME TODAY
justicedeclaration.org

The Justice Declaration is an initiative of the following organizations:



EVANGELICAL CALENDAR

Please join the evangelical community at these events hosted by the NAE and its members. **Your prayers are welcome too.**

Many of these events include downloadable resources for promotion and participation.

OCTOBER 4-7, 2017

CCDA National Conference

Detroit, MI

Christian Community Development Association
CCDA.org

Resilience — the theme of this year's conference — is essential for effective and sustainable Christian community development. Join other believers for instruction and inspiration in the pursuit of reconciliation and biblical justice.



JANUARY 22-26, 2018

Christian Student Leadership Conference

Washington, DC

National Association of Evangelicals
NAE.net/cslc

The Christian Student Leadership Conference is a place where college students who care deeply about today's pressing issues come to learn and consider how to engage in public policy. This year's theme is "Leadership for the Future."

OCTOBER 9-13, 2017

One Accord

Ridgecrest, NC

Accord Network
AccordNetwork.org

Each year, evangelical leaders in relief and development come together to leverage their combined learning and work towards the highest effectiveness in serving the vulnerable.



NOVEMBER 1-3, 2017

Race, Theology & Mission

Pasadena, CA

Fuller Theological Seminary
Fuller.edu/missiology2017

Fuller Seminary's 2017 Missiology Lectures will focus on developing historical, theological, interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches to race that will challenge conventional thinking. The academic lectures are for the evangelical community, global church and theological academy.



JANUARY 31-FEBRUARY 2, 2018

CCCU International Forum

Dallas, TX

Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
CCCU.org

Christian higher education professionals from around the world will gather together to worship, reflect on the past, share solutions to present realities, and build relationships for future collaborative engagement.

OCTOBER 26-28, 2017

Reformation Celebration Conference

South Hamilton, MA

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
GordonConwell.edu

The Reformation Celebration Conference will review the implications of Martin Luther's theology and actions for the life and ministry of the Church today.

NOVEMBER 29-30, 2017

Denominational Executives Retreat

Chicago, IL

National Association of Evangelicals
NAE.net/denominational-executives-retreat

NAE denominational executives spend time together — learning from and encouraging one another in their unique position of ministry.



Find additional Evangelical Calendar opportunities online at NAE.net/calendar.

✓ Supreme Win for Religious Liberty

At the end of June, the U.S. Supreme Court decided by a 7-2 vote that governments can't discriminate against churches that would otherwise qualify for funding just because they are faith-based organizations.

The case was brought by Trinity Lutheran Church, which applied for a grant from the state of Missouri to resurface its preschool playground using material made from recycled tires. The preschool serves children of all faiths, and it is open to all children in the community. Their proposal was one of the highest ranked proposals in the competitive bidding process. Yet Missouri denied it funding — even for the secular purpose of child safety — under a state provision prohibiting public money from going to religious organizations and houses of worship. In his decision for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, "There is no question that Trinity Lutheran was denied a grant simply because of what it is: a church."

Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, said, "This is a win for children, but even more for the equal treatment of all religious Americans. People of faith do not seek special preferences, but we do expect to be treated fairly when we offer to partner with government to advance public purposes."

✓ Protecting Foreign Aid

Foreign aid has been part of the national budget since the Marshall Plan after World War II, and typically comprises less than 1 percent of the U.S. budget. As the new budget works its way through Congress, the National Association of Evangelicals — along with other evangelical organizations — is watching to make sure it doesn't get cut.

Poverty-focused international aid, which is often administered through faith-based organizations, addresses a host of public health, disaster relief and food security issues, and promotes religious freedom and human rights.

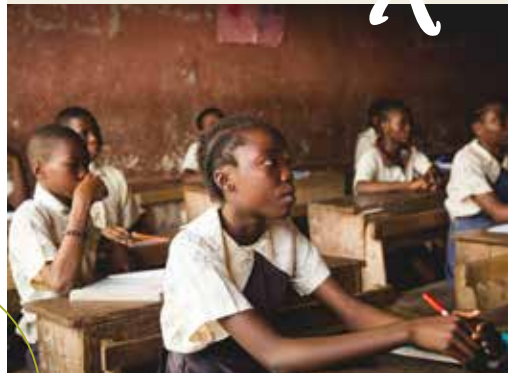
Eric Skytte, a lawyer who serves as a member of the NAE board, said, "This practice aligns the priorities of our government with God's heart for the poor, which is good in and of itself. But, even absent any religious underpinnings for such foreign aid, this practice demonstrates compassionate global leadership by the United States, which builds stronger relationships between the United States and the community of nations of which it is a member."

For More Information on Foreign Aid

Read a letter to Congress signed by 100 Christian leaders at NAE.net/foreignaidletter.

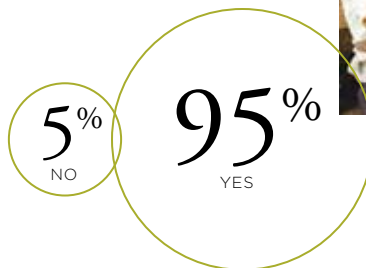
Listen to Today's Conversation podcast with Rich Stearns, president of World Vision, at NAE.net/stearnsodcast.

Read Leith Anderson's opinion article published in Newsweek at NAE.net/onepercent.



April 2017 Evangelical Leaders Survey

Should the United States continue foreign aid for the extreme poor?



✓ The Justice Declaration

The National Association of Evangelicals joined with Prison Fellowship, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Charles Colson Center for Christian Worldview, and close to 100 Christian leaders to launch the Justice Declaration this summer.

The declaration opens:

Because the good news of Jesus Christ calls the Church to advocate (or “be a witness”) for biblical truth and to care for the vulnerable, we, his followers, call for a justice system that is fair and redemptive for all. The Church has both the unique ability and unparalleled capacity to confront the staggering crisis of crime and incarceration in America and to respond with restorative solutions for communities, victims and individuals responsible for crime.



Read the Justice Declaration and add your support at [NAE.net/justice-declaration](https://www.nae.net/justice-declaration).

✓ Iraqi Christians in U.S. Face Deportation

Earlier this year, President Trump included Iraq on a list of seven countries for a travel ban. To be removed from the list, Iraq agreed to accept deportees from the United States — something it has not done since 2010. More than 1,400 Iraqis in America are now on the docket to be returned to Iraq. Many are Christians who fled Iraq due to persecution and are likely to face oppression and even death at the hands of extremists upon their return.

U.S. evangelical leaders — including NAE President Leith Anderson — called for a halt to deportations of Iraqi Christians, requesting that the administration defer until Iraq’s government “proves willing and capable of protecting the rights of religious minorities.” As of press time, a temporary hold had been placed on these deportations, but a final ruling had not been made.

✓ The Changing Global Religious Landscape

A recent report from Pew Research Center shows that Christians continue to be the largest religious group in the world, with nearly a third (31 percent) of the global population in 2015. Muslims make up 24 percent of the world’s population, followed by religious “nones” with 16 percent, Hindus with 15 percent and Buddhists with 7 percent.

Over the next 45 years, the world’s population is expected to increase by 32 percent to 9.6 billion. During that period, the number of Muslims is projected to increase by 70 percent due to it having the youngest population and highest fertility rate. This would bring the Muslim population to 3.0 billion in 2060, nearing the expected Christian population of 3.1 billion, according to Pew Research Center projections.

All other major world religions are expected to make up a smaller percentage of the global population in 2060 than they did in 2015, even though they may grow in absolute numbers.



For information on birth rates, conversion and religious “nones” in America, watch the NAE Webinar on Religious Trends in America with Greg Smith of Pew Research Center at [NAE.net/trendswebinar](https://www.nae.net/trendswebinar).



Brian Kluth is national director of NAE Financial Health.

Small Town, Small Church, Small Salary

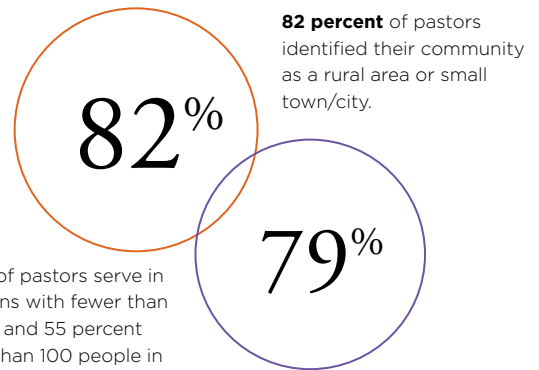
A New Initiative to Improve the Financial Health of Pastors and Churches

While Christian TV and radio shows and secular news coverage may focus on megachurches and well-known pastors in America, the vast majority of pastors quietly and faithfully serve their congregations while living with personal and church financial challenges.

Through the National Association of Evangelicals' research of 4,249 evangelical senior pastors, we discovered:

- 82 percent of pastors identified their community as a rural area or small town/city.
- Nearly 80 percent of pastors serve in congregations with fewer than 200 people, and 55 percent have fewer than 100 people in their church.
- The median annual budget of churches surveyed was \$125,000.
- 50 percent of pastors receive compensation under \$50,000 per year, even though many of them have advanced degrees.
- Only 5 percent said their denomination has “many resources” to help them with their personal finances, and only 9 percent said the denomination has “many resources” to help them with church finances.
- Only 14 percent of pastors said they received financial training from their seminary.

At recent pastors conferences where I have spoken, only 15 people out of 1,000 raised their hands when asked if they



were paid enough by their church to take care of their family's financial needs without any extra income.

The bottom line is that most rural and small town pastors and spouses have been “suffering in silence” and feel they have had nowhere and no one to turn to for help. And whatever financial and stewardship training might be available to help pastors and church leaders requires travel expenses and time that most churches can't afford.

One pastor in Colorado who had been at a church for 15 years shared that his congregation of 40 people stopped paying him three years ago, because they didn't have enough funds. He said the church didn't even have the money to pay



for the building expenses. He didn't want to see the church die ("I don't believe in church euthanasia!"). He turned to the denomination for resources for his own finances and the finances of the church, but they weren't able to help him.

A pastor in California who had been at his church for 13 years shared that his church had a building fund drive to raise money for a building expansion project. When the pledged funds didn't come in as promised, the church board cut his salary by 35 percent in order to pay for the loan on the building project. He said he wished there was committee-based training available to help him and his leadership board know how to encourage greater generosity in his church.

In Michigan, an associate pastor became an Uber and Lyft driver to help provide needed funds to pay household living expenses. While giving hundreds of rides to make extra money, this pastor has been able to share his faith and lead people to the Lord.

These stories and an examination of the NAE research shows a major change is needed to improve the financial health of pastors and churches. Thirty percent of pastors have student loan debt averaging \$36,039. Sixty-two percent of all pastors do not receive any retirement contribution from their church, even though 60 percent of pastors have been serving at their current church for over six years. Nearly 60 percent of pastors have less than \$50,000 in a retirement account. Fifty-nine percent do not receive family health insurance from their church, and 24 percent have unpaid medical debt averaging \$7,253.

But help is now on the way. Through generous grants

from Lilly Endowment Inc. to the National Association of Evangelicals and a number of our member denominations, several million dollars will be invested in providing financial resources and training to pastors, their spouses and church leadership teams. And, these resources are not just for small town and rural churches but for all churches and pastors, regardless of their size and location.

The NAE's project, NAE Financial Health, focuses on connecting and resourcing denominations, churches and pastors to improve the financial health of pastors and churches. Through free self-assessment surveys, Best Practices resources and online training courses, pastors and their churches can work together to improve their financial health. Even pastors and churches with larger budgets can improve their financial health by using these resources.

We are currently working with six NAE member denominations to offer customized online training courses on personal finances for pastors and spouses, and on church generosity for pastors and church leaders. However, any pastor or church can utilize the free self-assessment surveys, vast collection of Best Practices resources and online training at NAEfinancialhealth.org.

In addition to personal finances and church generosity, the site also includes resources and training on pastor compensation. Future modules will cover church finances and fundraising projects.

The NAE is also working with six NAE member denominations to provide matching grants to help pastors facing specific financial challenges such as medical needs, student loans, retirement readiness and special needs. In 2018, four more member denominations will be added. In future years, all NAE member denominations will be offered assistance to begin providing their own customized training and resources.

Pastors and spouses should not have to suffer in silence. There is now a place to find the practical help they need to not only survive, but to thrive. **E**



Learn more about the NAE Financial Health initiative at NAEfinancialhealth.org.

Review the NAE's research on the financial challenges of pastors at NAE.net/pastorresearch.




Martin Giese is president of Oak Hills Christian College in Bemidji, Minnesota, and co-author of "Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era." He pastored two rural churches over a period of 40 years.

The Thriving Rural Church

Martin Giese



While the vast majority of America’s land space is rural and a surprising number of ministry leaders in America have “served time” in rural churches, knowledge, vision and leadership for rural ministry is often overlooked in light of the need to reach the densely populated urban centers and suburban communities.

 ur culture is dominated by urban growth, cosmopolitan thinking and global concerns. But the needs and opportunities of rural places are significant as well. And church leaders willing to embrace the challenge discover the potential of rural ministry for unique kingdom impact.

Contextual Contrasts

Rural culture is historically very different from urban and suburban culture. Most rural people were farmers, and their livelihoods were constantly subject to factors beyond their control — the weather, crop and livestock diseases, global marketing patterns, etc. Living with this unpredictability and perpetual uncertainty remains a significant pressure in the lives of rural people. The driving dynamics of uncertainty and isolation directly affect how rural people think, relate and make decisions.

Urban life has always been more directly under the influence of people. Livelihood is dependent upon a specialized and interdependent system of commerce that produces and provides goods, services and information. People potential, possibilities and pressures define the environment.

In rural areas, there are fewer people and small institutions. People often work alone and independence is valued. In urban areas, there are more people and large institutions. People often work with others and interdependence is valued. Rural people work together for survival; urban people work together for achievement.

In rural communities, most people are their own CEOs. Organizational structures are flat. Cooperation is among equals. In urban centers, there is a smaller percentage of CEOs. Organizational structures are tiered. Group decisions are typically made through formal process in urban organizations. In rural communities, group decisions are often made by informal consensus.

It’s important to note that 21st century rural churches and communities are often socio-culturally conflicted — experiencing the tension of rural and urban differences. Effective leaders of rural churches must be able to understand and successfully navigate this tension.

And, rural populations today are increasingly complex. Rural is no longer universally synonymous with agriculture. Rural now includes academic communities, area trade centers, recreation communities, retirement communities and bedroom communities (where most people commute to a city for work).

Agriculture — once the defining industry and identity of rural culture — has undergone a transformation from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive enterprise. Farms are exponentially larger, and the agricultural population of rural regions is exponentially smaller.

Ron Klassen, executive director of the Rural Home Missionary Association said, “Currently, less than two percent of Americans are directly engaged in production agriculture, and 94 percent of the rural labor force is non-agricultural.”

An in-migration of varying ethnicities and varying socio-economic backgrounds has resulted in a new rural that, in some instances mirrors the socio-cultural complexity of larger urban centers.

A Big Mission

There are a lot of rural churches! Roughly one in five Americans live in communities of less than 2,500. Thousands of churches serve these communities. Thousands of additional churches occupy larger communities with a rural heritage and memory.

And, rural populations are growing. From the beginning of the 20th century through the 1960s, a rural exodus populated American cities. However, a reverse, urban to rural migration began in the 1970s, plateaued in the 1980s, rebounded in the 1990s and continues at varying rates today.

In a 2010 article, David Matarrita-Cascante, Richard Stedman and A.E. Lulof, wrote, “Because of their uniqueness and natural beauty, rural natural amenity-rich localities are among the fastest growing areas in the United States ... Managing rapid population and economic growth represents a new, potentially serious challenge for these communities.”

Growth and change in rural communities present challenges and opportunities for the churches and church leaders. New churches are needed. Existing churches need renewed vision.

Flourishing Rural Ministry

Rural ministry opportunities abound and defy traditional stereotypes. Not all rural churches are small. (At a recent conference for rural church leaders, guest speakers represented rural churches from 50–1,300 in weekend attendance.)

Not all small rural churches are spiritually stagnant or numerically declining. There are vital, growing, missional rural churches in every region of the country. Many more rural churches await visionary leaders to assist them in rediscovering their mission.

And, as we’ve already noted, not all rural communities have declining populations. Global population growth and regional migration are swelling the populations of both city and countryside with people who need Jesus!

Rural churches offer significant opportunities for leaders who place high value on building disciple-making relationships. Although rural communities are experiencing an increasing cosmopolitan influence and a corresponding acceleration of cultural pace, there remains a memory of — and appreciation for — significant long-term relationships. Rural remains a place where redemptive friendships have time to bear spiritual fruit.

Leadership Development

Rural churches have a successful track record of producing and exporting leaders for the work of the kingdom. The rhythms of rural life allow for times of spiritual reflection. The demands of rural life reward a strong work ethic. The unpredictability of rural life is an incentive for people to look to God for security.

High numbers of pastors, missionaries, business leaders and political leaders point to their rural upbringing as a key component in their personal formation. Pastors of rural churches have opportunity to equip the next generation of global leaders.

The Rural Home Missionary Association notes that three out of four graduates seeking pastoral ministry will spend at least some time in a small town or country church. But many are unprepared or underprepared for rural ministry.

Denominations, church associations, seminaries and colleges need to seriously consider how to better equip leaders for success in the rural context. Additional training in contextual analysis and cross-cultural leadership ought to be added to existing curricula. Students must be exposed

In order to effectively reach the largest cities of the world, we must mobilize a new generation of leaders who understand rural.

to effective and successful rural churches and rural church leaders. Existing assumptions about the limitations of rural ministry opportunities need to be challenged.

Reaching the World Through the Rural

Church leaders who are adequately prepared for success in rural ministry are also uniquely equipped to address the mission needs of many of the major urban centers of the world. Contrary to Western assumptions, most of the great cities of the world do not reflect the socio-cultural patterns of the great cities in the West. Conspicuously absent are the expansive, affluent suburbs found in American cities.

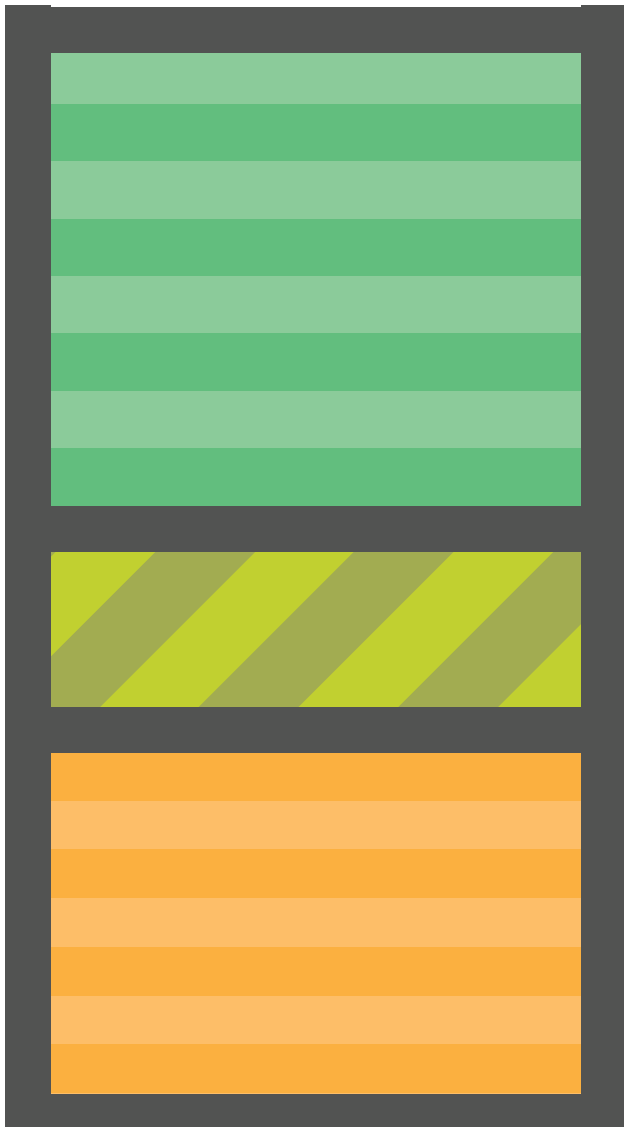
Global megacities are often composed of hundreds (sometimes thousands) of rural people groups that have immigrated to the city and continue to protect and preserve their rural culture and perspective. Reaching these people with the gospel requires leaders who understand rural/agrarian cultural values and behaviors. Curiously, in order to effectively reach the largest cities of the world, we must mobilize a new generation of leaders who understand rural.

Celebrate Rural Ministry

Rural ministry leaders are in need of affirmation, encouragement and equipping for greater effectiveness. The American church has consistently celebrated the success of innovative ministries in large population centers while often overlooking or even denigrating innovative, successful ministries in smaller places.

Too often rural ministry is regarded as a context to which we are “consigned” rather than called. However, Jesus gave his life for the salvation of all people. If he gave his life to establish his church in rural places, Christian leaders ought to feel honored, and be honored for serving his church in rural places!

Rural ministry opportunities will continue. This changing, complex, culturally conflicted, growing segment of America presents significant opportunities for ministry professionals willing to serve Christ in the country and beyond. ❸





Randy Cantrell is a sociologist and professor at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln and an extension specialist at Rural Futures Institute and Center for Applied Rural Innovation.

The Rural Mindset

For sociologists, “rural” is a concept with many definitions. As a result, the intuitive notion of a rural place can be at odds with definitions used for statistical and policy purposes. The statistical definition of rural that has historically been used by the Census is that of a place (typically an incorporated community) with a population of fewer than 2,500 residents. That definition can be problematic, identifying a town of 2,501 as an urban place — something that would likely confuse or even irritate the people who live there.



Still, for most purposes, the intuitive concept of rural is sufficient, and the statistical nuances of a definition can be left to the statisticians. At the simplest level, two characteristics seem to be of primary relevance. First, a rural place is small, often with a population that can be counted in hundreds rather than thousands. Second, a rural place is also relatively isolated, being far enough from a large population center that a commuting labor force is unlikely and access to urban amenities is logistically difficult.

Satisfaction Rates

Since 1996, the University of Nebraska has conducted an annual survey involving about 2,000 nonmetropolitan households. The Nebraska Rural Poll has documented differences between large communities and small communities. First, there are the obvious ones such as shopping and dining choices, entertainment and housing options, health care and other services. All are more readily available in a larger community. And, when we ask about satisfaction with those things, the larger the community, the greater their reported level of satisfaction.



However, when we ask about less tangible aspects of life, such as family time, relationships with neighbors, environment for children, free time and environmental quality, reported satisfaction tends to be higher in more rural locations. In this case, the smaller the community the higher the level of reported satisfaction.

In the main, both rural and urban residents indicate that they like it where they are. But, for advocates of rural life, there is a kind of moral victory in these documented differences in satisfaction. Rural residents — it can be argued — express satisfaction with things that are seen as being of greater intrinsic value than the more consumer oriented amenities that satisfy urban residents. However, it's not quite that simple, and there may well be an accompanying downside to these observations.

Interaction With Others

What best distinguishes day-to-day life in small rural places is the ubiquitous nature of interactions with known others. This is perhaps best exemplified by the small town habit of waving at everyone who passes. In small places it is likely that the shopkeeper with whom one does business will be seen again in church, at school functions, at the grocery store, the slow pitch game and the café. Beyond knowing individuals by name, it is also likely that one will know biographical details of that individual.

Compare this to interactions in an urban environment, which are much more likely to be role based and involve no personal familiarity. The person with whom one does business is more likely to be identified by company clothing, logos and I.D. tags than to be known by name. Role-based interactions are generally efficient and effective, but they do not carry with them the social bonds and sense of community generated by interactions with known others.


On the other hand, residents of the smallest communities are less likely to accept the proposition that the community in which they live can influence its own future through collective effort. One-third of survey respondents from communities with fewer than 500 residents report that meaningful self-directed community change is not possible. They are also more likely to agree that individuals are powerless to affect their own conditions and future. These attitudes argue against successful rural development efforts and are unlikely to align with the opinions of community leaders attempting to introduce positive changes.


Finally, the Nebraska Rural Poll of 2006 found that the residents of very small communities were less accepting of new residents in general and of immigrants in particular than were their more urban neighbors. This was true despite their general agreement that population decline was a serious problem for such communities. The apparent dysfunction in those two opinions can best be described as an issue of trust. Newcomers, who arrive without a known biography, are simply regarded with suspicion.

Implications for Churches

For rural churches, these documented characteristics of small town residents could prove to be instructive. Certainly, the church plays a special role in rural places, often providing the best or even the only facility available to host community events and discussions. Throughout rural America, churches serve as gathering places for secular youth groups, polling places, community development discussions and more.

Even given the central place of the church as a community institution, a pastor receiving a call from a rural congregation may not necessarily find that their role in the larger community is accepted on face value. A pastor of any local church should understand the social, cultural and economic environment of that community.

For example, while new pastors may be a bit reticent about sharing their biographies with strangers, not doing so may make it difficult for a community that is hesitant to welcome newcomers. It may seem a bit odd for pastors to prioritize sharing details about their lives, family origins and personal interests, but it is actually an important part of successful assimilation into a small and tightly bonded population. In rural communities, credibility and legitimacy come more from biography than role. 



All Nebraska Rural Poll reports from 1996 through 2016 can be found at RuralPoll.UNL.edu. All reports are referenced by year and topic.





The Rural Reality of Poverty

Sometimes images of Andy Griffith and Mayberry form our perception of rural America. Unfortunately, realities of poverty and isolation are closer to the truth of what the average small town community experiences today.

Current poverty rates in rural America exceed the poverty rates in urban communities, and there are significantly less social services available to address these needs, according to the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services (NACRHHS). Persistent poverty counties have poverty rates of 20 percent or higher, and 88 percent of persistent poverty counties are rural.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture notes that one in four children in rural America lives in poverty. And rural areas have more single guardian households than urban areas. People in rural areas also struggle with unemployment, substance abuse and domestic abuse. According to NACRHHS, a rural teen is more likely to misuse drugs and alcohol than an urban teen. Pew Research Center declared drug abuse to be the leading problem in rural America.

As Christians we know that statistics are not the full picture, but we must ask ourselves: If the church vanished from these small towns, would anyone notice? Instead of asking, “How big is your church?” we should ask, “How is your church impacting its community?”

The Church’s Strategic Role

Several years back, I heard a lecture on small communities. The professor’s research revealed what I have observed. In the past, there were three foundations of a small town: the family, public schools and the local church. The community often centered around the local church. Over time, the family unit splintered, local churches lost much of their influence, and only public

schools remained as a foundation in small towns. Despite this shift, the local church is still the best equipped to facilitate healthy development within communities.

Recently, a friend purchased a pair of jeans for over a hundred dollars, replete with designer holes and frays. His grandmother offered to wash his laundry while he was away, and after returning home, he found that Grandma had patched the holes and cut off the frays of his jeans. Grandma didn’t understand the value of the frayed jeans.

Likewise, outsiders of a small town often do not understand the community’s local culture and its interpersonal relationships. Because the church is made up of its community and because it is God’s highest order in a community, the local church can and must once again become a foundational entity in small town life.

A Change in Focus

Rural church pastors often understand the vastness of the poverty around them. They may wonder — while often battling their own limited resources — how they can minister to their community in need. Often, learning how to serve in these situations begins with a change in focus.

In “Crazy Love” Francis Chan says, “Christians are like manure: Spread them out and they help everything grow better, but keep them in one big pile and they stink horribly!”

Hiding behind the four walls of the church building makes the church itself ineffective and inconsequential. However, when a church longs to roll up its sleeves, spread out and collaborate together with their communities, a powerful force to address rural poverty can finally be unlocked.





Christian Communitarians

Rural Compassion works in over 1,000 communities, partnering with multiple churches of different denominations to train and coach their pastors to become communitarians. We suggest church leaders spend up to one third of their time working with community stakeholders. Collaboration between the church, schools, civic circles and government is essential. One rural pastor tells his story of becoming a communitarian:

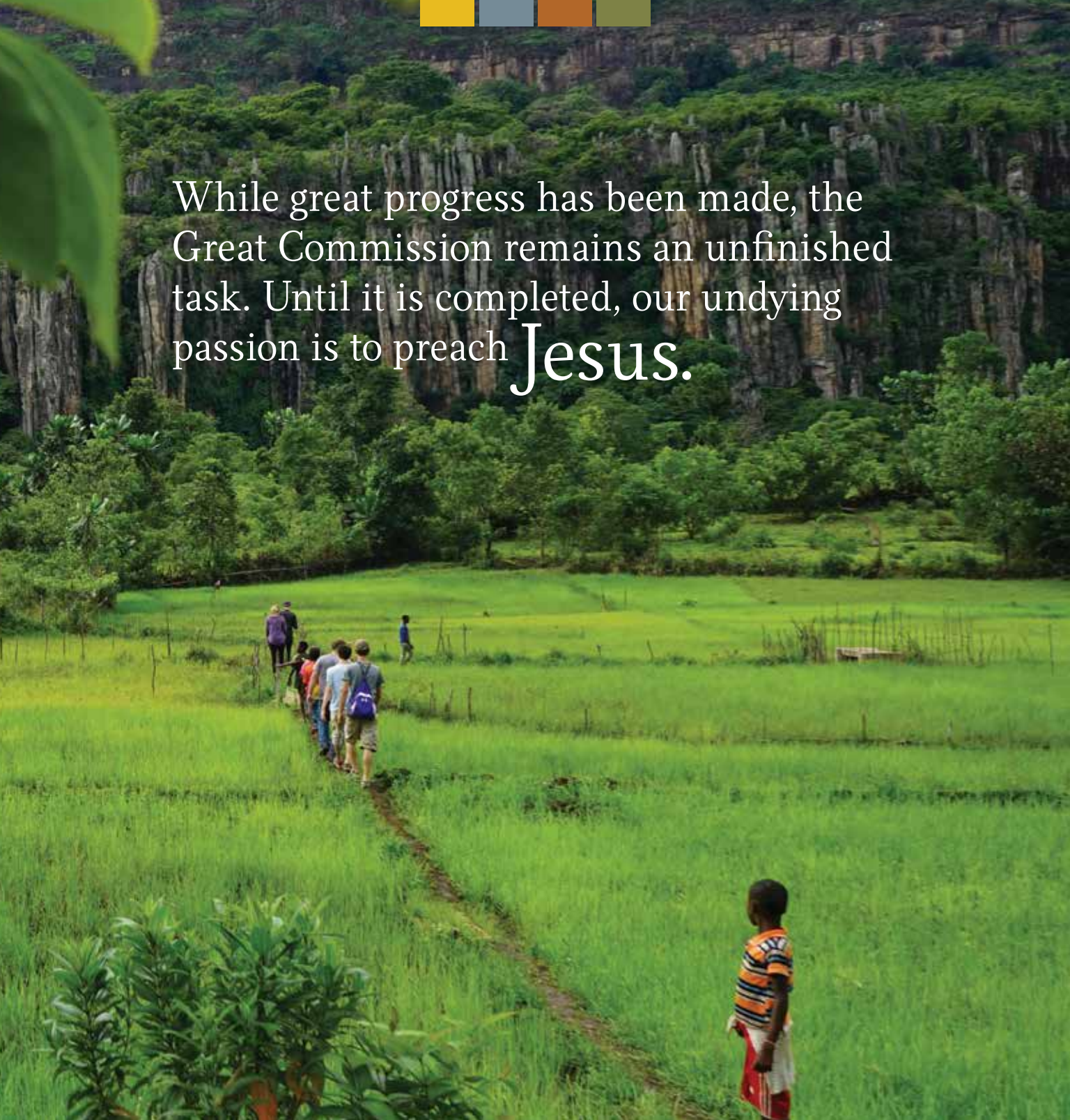
I met with three law enforcement agency leaders, as well as the mayor, fire chief, Justice Court judge, soccer commissioner, directors of the counseling center, and the Chamber of Commerce. I also contacted hospice, the owners of the mortuary, hardware and lumberyard businesses, and the building inspector. I attended multifaith ministers meetings and made myself available to the hospital and the assisted care facility. My wife partnered with the local schools. Through these contacts, we are seeing how the church can intentionally serve the community.

Other ways of addressing community needs can include honoring public servants, offering classroom supplies for teachers, becoming a reading buddy in the schools, coaching sports teams, and undertaking community work projects.

Rural Compassion also resources churches in small towns. This year we will give away over 125,000 pairs of new shoes through the rural church to children in the local schools. All of these create intentional relationships through which we can collectively address the needs of poverty and ultimately share the love of Christ.

As the church positions itself as an important leader in its community to serve the dire needs rural communities face, we begin to see those same communities become places where children and families flourish. Thanks to local pastors and church congregants with ambition to collaborate with their communities and local stakeholders, there is a fresh spirit stirring through rural American communities. **E**





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Charlie Cotherman is pastor of Oil City Vineyard in Oil City, Pennsylvania.

Leaving the City to Plant in a Small Town

Like many evangelical young people, I looked up to church planters. I appreciated the risk they took for the gospel. It reminded me of the missionary biographies I loved as a child. (I am also pretty sure that I thought church planters were just plain cool.)

Something changed when I entered seminary. As church planting morphed in my mind from an intriguing idea to a real possibility I began to notice that very few church planting organizations seemed concerned about people living in places like the rural corner of America where I grew up. Church planting seemed to be almost exclusively the domain of urban and suburban hipsters. I knew cities mattered, but I wondered how entire church planting networks could so easily overlook millions of people living in America's small towns and rural areas. Disillusioned, I began to think that my days as an aspiring church planter were over.

God had other ideas.

In the summer of 2016, my wife and I loaded up a U-Haul truck and moved with our three kids (ages 4, 2, and 3 months) and a half-completed dissertation in tow from the bustling university town of Charlottesville, Virginia, to Oil City, Pennsylvania, a small town about 30 minutes from where we grew up. In many ways Oil City seemed to epitomize the problems of the Rust Belt. Since Quaker State Motor Oil moved its corporate headquarters out of town in the mid-1990s, Oil City has experienced an infrastructure collapse marked by poverty, falling population, blighted housing, a brain drain and drug abuse.

But as real as the problems are, we have also found an amazing amount of promise in our town. We discovered that many in Oil City are excited to hear about new ideas and to see young leaders (Millennials, even!) who are willing to roll up their sleeves and love their town. We joined the Chamber of Commerce, adopted a block and welcomed community leaders into a service for a panel discussion. In all of this we see God's hand opening doors for influence and connecting us to other churches and leaders in our town. We are praying for synergy — kingdom synergy!

We are also praying that many more embark on this adventure by following the big call of God to “small” places.

In all of this we see God's hand opening doors for influence and connecting us to other churches and leaders in our town.



On Pastoring the Rural:

Paul Jorgensen

Paul Jorgensen has served as lead teaching pastor at Cornerstone Church in Litchfield, Minnesota, for the past seven years. Prior to this he and his wife, Sharon, served with WorldVenture as church planters in Austria. Paul and Sharon have four children and four grandchildren. In their free time, they like to ride motorcycles.

TELL US THE STORY OF CORNERSTONE CHURCH.

Cornerstone was founded in 1942. In 2000, the leadership decided to make Cornerstone a regional church. This involved re-defining who we were, establishing biblical and ministry foundations, and multiplying ministry through other sites and support for other churches.

We moved to a new site with a new building and name, focused on ministry to people in their 20s-40s. Cornerstone has grown in attendance from 200 to over 1,100 — in a town of 6,700 people. We are laying groundwork for our second campus, and support other churches through coaching and consulting.

HOW DO OTHER CHURCHES AND PASTORS IN NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES RELATE TO THE SUCCESS OF CORNERSTONE?

Our relationships with others are cordial and collegial. We work together occasionally as part of community fundraisers or the local ministerial association. Cornerstone tries to reach as many people as we can, and encourage others to do the same — celebrating when they do.

A small church about 50 miles from us wanted to learn about Hispanic outreach (11 percent of Litchfield is Hispanic, and we have a Spanish-speaking ministry). That conversation grew into dreaming about the impact they could have in the three communities that make up their school district. From their input, we also identified things we could improve on in Cornerstone's ministry. I hope more and more churches will choose to grow together.

HOW CAN RURAL CHURCHES GROW IN COMMUNITIES THAT AREN'T GROWING? OR, IS CHURCH GROWTH THE WRONG QUESTION FOR RURAL CHURCHES?

The key is health. Healthy things grow. We focus on being spiritually and emotionally healthy, which includes helping people learn to share their faith and creating events — including worship services — that our people want to invite friends and family to.

Rural churches also need to think regionally. A pastor friend in Iowa told me, “People here will drive two hours to play, one hour to work, and 30 minutes to Menards’ [a hardware chain]. We assume they’ll drive 30 minutes to church.” Focusing on a county as opposed to a town is a good start.

Another thing is mission. Many small town churches have a wonderful legacy. But we can confuse strategy with mission, and we hang on to a ministry that was effective for a season but is so no longer. Leaders in rural churches need to celebrate and honor the past; then let what that mission looks like in the 21st century shape their strategy. In other words, be willing to change in order to stay the same.

PRIOR TO BECOMING A RURAL PASTOR IN THE UNITED STATES, YOU PLANTED CHURCHES IN AUSTRIA. HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRIA PREPARE YOU FOR MINISTRY IN RURAL AMERICA?

Both small town cultures place tremendous value on family, strong work ethic, harmony and appearances. Relationships are everything, and there is tremendous pride in community. Enthusiastically attending school events, festivals and parades is crucial.

One difference between planting churches in Austria and Minnesota was an expectation for pastors to function as chaplains. A friend who pastored in a Midwestern state was required to visit everyone in the hospital every day. With two hospitals that serviced that area — each 35 miles away in opposite directions — and an older congregation, you can imagine what that did to his time and bank account.

As a church planter, I was primarily an equipper, and not the pastor or chaplain of the church. We needed to equip the body to minister to each other. That lesson has been tremendously helpful.

DO RURAL CHURCHES HAVE SPECIAL CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING EXCELLENT PASTORS, AS COMPARED TO URBAN AND SUBURBAN CHURCHES?

We can’t offer salaries that can be offered in the suburbs. The nearest mall is 27 miles away, and a good portion of the stores are empty. Many gifted people won’t give small towns a look. But, we’ve learned that our drawing radius is 22 miles, and 80,000 people live within that circle. 68,000 of them rarely attend church. That’s a mission field that is big enough for anyone.


YOU CONNECT WITH RURAL CHURCH PASTORS IN MINNESOTA AND ELSEWHERE. WHAT ARE THEIR BIGGEST CONCERNS OR CHALLENGES?

Many are paid low salaries, and quite a few live in parsonages. They don’t have the opportunity to build equity, and can’t save much with their salary. Many in their churches are older on fixed incomes. Plus, if their largest givers are in agriculture, a hailstorm or a drought can change income in a hurry.

Self-image is another issue. Evangelical culture can be performance-oriented. Large and visible ministries are celebrated. This year we hosted a conference for small town and rural churches. I sent out a poll beforehand to see if there would be interest. One response I got was: “I don’t want to go to another conference that tells me what a lousy job I’m doing.”

WHAT SHOULD DENOMINATIONS OR OTHER CHURCH NETWORKS BE DOING TO SUPPORT RURAL CHURCHES AND PASTORS?

Affirm and celebrate them. Provide resources for pastoral care that are crafted uniquely for these churches and pastors. Encourage training institutions to focus on equipping pastors for rural ministry in the same way we focus on urban or cross-cultural ministry.

I love a line from the book “No Little People” by Francis Schaeffer: “... in God’s sight there are no little people and no little places.” I can’t thank God enough that his place for me is a small place by human standards. But by God’s standards, it’s huge. 





America's 15%

Rural is most of America if you measure by land — 72 percent of the land area of the United States belongs to rural counties.

Rural is only 15 percent of America if you measure by population in rural counties — 46.2 million out of 308 million population. But, 46 million is 8 million more than the population of California and nearly twice the population of Texas and 26 million more population than either New York or Florida. In other words, there are a lot of people living in rural America.

The Census Bureau has a curious way of deciding who is rural and who is not. Urban is defined as one or more cities of 50,000+ with adjacent integrated areas. Rural is defined as anywhere that isn't urban.

Towns of less than 10,000 that are county seats or have the local schools and hospitals can have resources and culture more like larger cities. Minnesota has 87 counties, which makes for a lot of county seat towns. Arizona has 15 counties, which makes for fewer county seats and more decentralized communities.

But, there are also cultural differences shaped by type of industry, population growth or decline, age of population, ethnic and racial diversity, education levels, job opportunities and more. Towns with industry and jobs keep young adults better than towns with few employment opportunities. Rural agricultural areas are declining in population while rural tourist areas are growing in population.

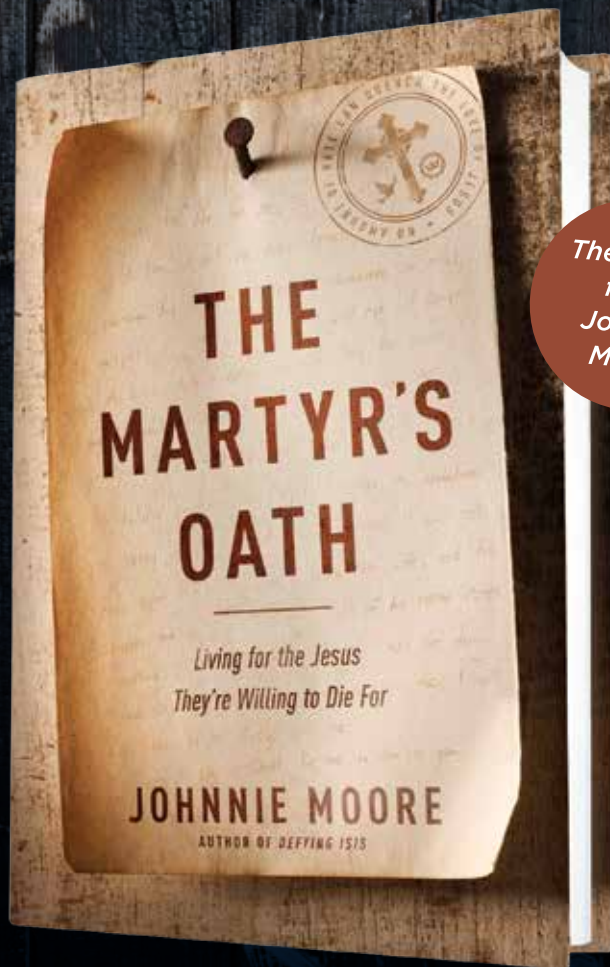
A rural sociologist recently told me that only 5 percent of rural populations work in agriculture or agricultural related industry.

Some of our stereotypes often miss the mark. Back roads through villages in upstate New York look really rural to me although many associate New York with urban cities. Fargo, North Dakota is a booming urban center in a state most Americans have never visited and assume to be all rural. A rural sociologist recently told me that only 5 percent of rural populations work in agriculture or agricultural related industry. He said that rural residents lock their doors at the same rates as urban residents. I would have gotten the answers wrong if asked about these statistics on a quiz.

Having grown up in America's largest metropolitan area (New York) and pastored in a small Colorado city surrounded by sugar beet farms, I learned Paul's principle in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." He wrote different style letters to the citizens of urban Rome than to the spread out villagers of Galatia. To the urban he became urban and to the rural he became rural. **E**

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