

13 Characteristics of Indigenous or “Local” Rural Pastors

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Doug Walrath took a last look at small church life, shortly before he retired in 1990 from Bangor Seminary, by doing a study of rural pastors in New England. He was critical of most of them at two points: (1) they were informed by Industrial Age thinking which stresses efficiency, standardization, tasks more than relationships, and the concept that there is “one best way to do things”; (2) many just passed through on their way to the city. Walrath, who played a key role in the resurgence of interest in small churches, contended that rural culture is not like urban Industrial Age culture. Rural folk tend the “make do” on the farm and in the church. Their explanation of “why things happen” is more “spiritual” and less “mechanistic” than that of modern society. He also asked pastors to stay with rural churches for the long haul, doing the work of the church in the local idiom. He told them to find satisfaction in impacting the lives of people deeply. (See Chapter 8, Carl Dudley, et al *Carriers of Faith*.)

I had the privilege of participating in the consultation when Walrath presented the findings of his study. While I agreed with his findings, even applauded them, I know many rural pastors who meet the criteria that Walrath sets—they are not sold out to Industrial Age thinking, and they stay with their rural churches for the long haul. These are the indigenous or “local” preachers that one finds in the sectarian/evangelical, Made in America, rural churches particularly in the South. I would argue that some of them are often too bound to the culture to speak a prophetic word, too much like their parishioners in world view and in deeds to lead them to a more godly walk; too tied to their common pre-industrial culture to challenge its errors. In short, if the Mainline pastors that he found in New England are in the ditch on one side of the road, many rural pastors in the South are in the ditch on the other side of the road. Both are flawed. Aren’t we all? Yet, both have a role to play.

In my study of the literature related to rural church life I find that these local, indigenous, sectarian pastors are largely ignored. And when not ignored, they are made light of. In truth any effort to be of help to rural church life in America must understand and address these preachers. In many areas they are the dominant expression of ministry. I believe that Robert Duval had this point in mind when he filmed *The Apostle*. This story of an effective, but flawed, sectarian rural pastor captures many of their values, behavior patterns, style, manner, appearance, and common scripts. Other glimpses of these ministers can be found in the literature related to Appalachian religion. For the most part these ministers are oral, not literary, so one must hear them if one is to understand them.

As a seminary trained Southern Baptist minister who has worked mostly in rural areas, I have had many occasions to observe, know and work with these indigenous ministers. I have come to see them as important partners in the Kingdom enterprise. I continue to be critical of much that some do, but I have come to also applaud much that they do do.

Here I seek to list some of the most common characteristics of these preachers. I offer this as an initial listing. It is subject to revision. Certainly, all 13 characteristics are not descriptive of every one of these ministers. But I believe them to be descriptive of many Southern Baptist rural,

indigenous ministers, and to those in other faith families as well.

1. **Centrality of the “Call”.** Their claim to authority centers in having been called of God to “preach the word”. Schooling, ordination, and experience are all secondary to the call. It is an irresistible call much like that of Jeremiah, the prophet. The “fire burns in their bones”. Being a preacher becomes their primary social role and self-identity. They are identified as “preacher” and take pride, mostly godly pride, in this designation. For some this results in a kind of authoritarianism and a demand to be in “total” charge of the church. In some well-established congregations this demand often becomes a point of contention.

2. **KJV Bible Literate.** They are expected to “know the Bible”, and they diligently seek to fulfill this expectation. They recognize and respect its authority. Mostly, they see it as literal revelation of propositional truth. They learn the biblical basis for the beliefs of Christianity and of the particular faith family that they are connected with. When confronted by disputes with representatives of other denominations, they will explain away passages that, when taken literally seem to argue against their position, by treating them as figurative. Many reject modern translations and modern hermeneutics. I fear that they sometimes are more focused on winning an argument than on finding truth. (Certainly, this is true among those with a Scots-Irish heritage in which the tribal chieftain is expected to be a powerful warrior.) Yet, one must honor their commitment and sincerity; as well as, their focus on biblical truth.

3. **Capable in the Manly Arts of the Cultural Area.** In an area where skills in hunting and fishing are prized, many of these ministers will be very competitive with lay persons in exercising these skills. Likewise they know how to do manual labor and till the soil, or tend livestock. Many are skilled in the basic craftsman trades, and some appear to be effective “jacks of all trades”. In short, around the fellowship table in the church hall, or down at the cafe, they can usually, swap stories about the things that laymen do, at least the moral ones, with the best of lay folk. These “points of contact” and shared experiences are often the basis for establishing a relationship that results in conversion of some “good old boy” sinner.

4. **Aggressively Evangelistic.** There are strong social norms for the preacher to be aggressive about discovering the spiritual state of persons around him, skilled as sharing “the plan of salvation”, and effective in drawing persons to faith in Christ and into church membership. High honor is afforded those who excel as evangelists.

5. **Good People Skills.** These preachers are expected to be good mixers. They know and are known among the people in the same cultural set from which they came and to whom they minister. Often they will grab control of an interactional setting and move it in the direction they desire. Of course, some of their aggressiveness may turn those from a different culture off or away, and some are not seen as very contextually sensitive, within their group, they are skilled at meeting and greeting folk. Within their cultural set, noted sinners and those who aspire to be noted, will ridicule these preachers. They are the source of the many “anti-clerical” jokes and stories in folk culture.

6. Great Story Tellers. The folks who attend their churches and the folk they are most effective with tend to be “oral” as contrasted with “literary” folk. The Gospel truth is communicated by them through moving stories that touch the heart. Most of their listeners are not trained to follow and critique the logic of their presentation of the Gospel. The touchstone of effectiveness is the quality of the story. Rhetorical skill, not logic, is the basis of evaluation.

7. Pre-modern World View. Our modern world view is organized around the concept that a natural explanation can be found as the cause of all, or most all, events. This replaced for many the earlier, pre-modern, view that found spiritual explanations for many events. God was seen as the cause of good and some evil events. Satan was believed to be the cause of many bad events. Many rural indigenous pastors and the people they serve continue to accept a pre-modern explanation of causation. Those of us who have been trained to look at the world with the eyes of modernity, struggle to minister to pre-modern persons. (At least some commentators see in the movement into a post-modern era the possibility of a world view that blends natural and spiritual explanations of the causation of events.

8. Mentored. Most of the local preachers do not have much formal theological training. Most have been mentored by those who were mentored by the old saints of their faith family. What they believe, how they explain doctrine, how they preach, how they witness, how they lead a church has mostly been learned through “on the job training” by other, revered, ministers. This approach has equipped them to be good leaders in terms of the spiritual expectations of the present members of the churches, but it does not lend itself to stretch the minds and hearts of the people. It lends itself to encouraging the churches to become tradition bound. In our age with so much change occurring, the result may be that the churches are not effective in reach the rising generations. Because of the mentoring process, one often finds a strong “fraternal” relationship among the local pastors. Sometimes there is competition. Sometimes there is even conflict. But more common is cooperation and brotherhood.

9. Status and Joy Related to Effectiveness in Evangelism Events. Adulation comes to those who are effective in revival services. Churches remember “the big meetings” when the altar was full, folk got saved, and the church rolls were swelled. The local preachers take great joy in remembering when their works in a revival were blessed by the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting and saving the lost. For many, this is the focus of their ministry. They do not give a lot of attention in their preaching or their work to discipling and training lay persons for caring ministry. The preacher does the work of evangelism.

10. St. Paul is the Model. My sense is that the local preachers find their model for ministry in Paul. In him they find justification for being aggressive and even combative. Paul was persecuted and they often expect to be. Paul suffered, and they expect to suffer. Paul had problems in the churches. They expect to have to deal with problems in the churches. Paul confronted those with whom he disagreed. They are ready to do the same. For many, more texts are taken from Paul than from the Gospels. Paul was an underdog who expected to be victorious. They identify with this.

11. Gathered Ecclesiology. While mainline churches tend to view a close connection between church and the community in which it exists, the local preachers tend to see the congregation as a group of saved persons gathered out of the community. Typically, the churches pastored by local preachers do not have high day by day involvement in community life. They are the members of the Kingdom and need to be separate from the fallen, evil world. Few have thought about the implications for community leadership, should the church be successful in winning the majority of persons in the community to their understanding of Christianity. What then would be the responsibility of the church for general community life.?

12. Strict Personal Morality. For the most part indigenous preachers are hard on vices and supportive of personal virtues. (These vary from one rural area to another. For example, consider the use of snuff. In some areas it is forbidden,;in others, frowned upon; in others, tolerated; and in still others normative. Many are critical of social evils, but fewer are involved in realistic efforts for social justice. Often their understanding of how to solve social problems is to evangelize everyone, rather than dealing with systemic reforms.

13. Preacher More than Pastor. The traditional role for ministers in the evangelical, sectarian, Made in America, churches was preacher, more than pastor. Most of these congregations were “covenanted communities” gathered from the larger community around the “stackpole” of theological distinctives. The congregation was locally owned and operated. The minister was hired primarily to moderate monthly business meetings and lead in public worship. The minister would come to the church or churches that he pastored for one weekend per month. His understanding of the job was to preach an evangelistic/doctrinal sermon. Pastoral care was provided by the members of the congregation between the times when the minister came to the church. This approach was very different from that of the mainlines. Their understanding of ministry was and is that of a minister was pastor to the community. One of the struggles the evangelicals have had has been to shift the understanding of the role of minister from preacher to pastor.

In terms of the historic understanding of pastoring, the pastor should be helping church members find meaning in life’s experiences, form a sense of community within the church, and be empowered for public ministry. If a minister sees his role as primarily preaching, this will tend to cause a person to neglect some elements of this historical role of pastoring. I see this as a real weakness in the ministry of many local ministers.

In sum, I think that there are strengths and weaknesses in the approach to ministry taken by the local ministers. They are out there, and they will continue to be. They are effective, but they also have weaknesses. It is my sense that with the changing nature of rural America both mainline formally educated and mentored local ministers are needed for the Kingdom of God to be as effective as it needs to be. They need to come to see one another as allies. They need to see how they can compliment one another. Will they?