

FIFTEEN STEPS FOR LEADING A STABLE RURAL CHURCH OFF THE PLATEAU

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Many ministers are ill-prepared to lead a small rural or village church. The new pastor comes to the pastorate with one set of expectations and understandings and finds a church with a different set. The stage is set for conflict and hurt.¹ You do not want this. The church does not need it. May I suggest some steps you might take in discovering the inner life of the smaller membership church you serve?

1. **The members of the church want to know about you.** They want to know about your upbringing, your pilgrimage of faith, your beliefs. Try to be transparent and autobiographical in your messages and conversations. Of course, be sensitive to their taboos and expectations as you do this.
2. **Demonstrate real interest in the congregation's "story."** One way to do this to by preaching in the morning service a message on the basic tasks of the local church. This approach provides parameters for a talk-back session in the evening for the members to share with you the founding dream and the work of the church. Seek to include discussion of the history of the community. By focusing on change, which they have observed in the life both of the church and of its community, you will stimulate insightful discussion. Weeks later, people will likely be sharing with you anecdotes about events and changes.²
3. **Identify the "bell cow" (leader).** Most rural congregations have experienced times of poor and/or no pastoral leadership. In this vacuum, strong lay leadership has emerged. Encourage this lay-person to become your mentor and learn from him/her how the church functions, how decisions are made, where the "land mimes" are. Realize his/her endorsement of a project you want to see done may be crucial. Although the time may come when disagreement and even estrangement may occur regarding changes you want to initiate, do not seek conflict when cooperation is possible.³
4. **Use the letters to the seven churches in the Revelation to identify strengths and weaknesses common to churches.** Devote a message to each church, followed by a forum in which the congregation can discuss the presence of these same strengths and weaknesses in their church. Discuss how they might draw on their strengths to be a more effective church. Discuss how they might address their weaknesses.⁴
5. **Involve the church in active, aggressive prayer.** Pray that God will help the church use its

¹ Anthony Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1988).

² See Chapter 5, Carl Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1979). See also James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structure* (Philadelphia: Forten Press, 1987). and Rockwell Smith, *Rural Ministry and the Changing Community* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971).

³Gary Farley, "Where Are You Headed?" *The Baptist Program*, September 1988, 8.

⁴Gary Farley, "And Now Presenting the Small Church," *Tennessee Baptist and Reflector*, 17 February 1988, 5.

- strengths and overcome its weaknesses in effective ministry.
6. **Identify an event/project the church might do successfully.** Organize. Do the project. Enjoy. (Many small churches suffer from a kind of inferiority complex. A successful project may be what is needed to build a sense of confidence).⁵
 7. **Integrate what you are learning about your church and your community.** Give special attention to identifying ministry needs, persons who are unchurched, and those who are without faith.
 8. **Share your observations.** Include your observations and vision in the list of prayer concerns.
 9. **Identify the annual events.** Rural churches cherish annual events—revival, homecoming, Vacation Bible School, cemetery decoration, Christmas program, community Holy Week observance. Use these events as the core of annual calendar planning. Help the leaders of each event to plan well.
 10. **Identify other events or projects the church might do, cooperate in, or sponsor.** Ask the church to consider and adopt these, then include the events and/or projects into the planning process. (You will note that here I am addressing what seems to be the basic flaw in many rural churches—the lack of intentionality. Further, in asking the church to adopt an event or project, you will be asking for additional time and money from the people as well as reallocation of existing resources. Risk is involved in this. Hear objections. Take them seriously. Seek consensus if at all possible.) When introducing change, take small steps. Encourage the people to do what is best for the church. If opposition arises, ask for a "trial" period for the new project, event, or program. Remember, the people may know better. You can be wrong.
 11. **Provide skill training for your members as they carry out the changes approved by the congregation.** Training them will provide the motivation for and a determiner of the religious education curriculum.
 12. **Anticipate that the renewed activity and ministry of the church will attract estranged members and some unbelieving persons.** Certainly if the members feel good about their church and its success, they will be talking about it and inviting others to become a part of it. But a problem in many small country churches is that the members are not intentional about including new people—and they may be slow to forgive old wrongs. Being forewarned, take steps to prepare. Identify the gifts the new persons bring. Involve them in ministry. Arrange for their needs to be met. Forge linkages with the old members. Provide educational activities and events that will bind the old with the new.
 13. **Be missionary-minded.** Many small churches slip into a survival mentality, which seems to hasten their demise. To look beyond themselves and to help other churches and people restores vision and helps small churches get moving again.⁶
 14. **Lead the congregation to consider and cooperatively seek consensus on what the will of God is for the church.** What ministries will it major on? Who will it seek to evangelize? How will it assist believers in spiritual growth?
 15. **Assist the church in organizing itself and in allocating its resources to do the ministry God has for it to do.**

I believe that if you will conscientiously do what these 15 steps call for, you will see God do some wonderful things—in your church, among the lost, in the lives of the saints. And in you! Try them.

⁵Gary Farley, "The Single-Staff Church and its Annual Events," *Church Administration*, July 1988, 17.

⁶David Ray, *Small Churches are the Right Size* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982).