

**COLLECTED WISDOM OF THE FORKS OF THE CREEK
or THE SAYINGS OF DEACON JIM, AUNT CORA, AND BROTHER BEN
or A SURVIVAL KIT FOR PASTORS OF SMALL (SINGLE-STAFF)
CHURCHES
or SOME THINGS THEY FORGOT TO TELL ME (OR MAYBE I FAILED TO
HEAR) IN THE SEMINARY ABOUT ME AND MY CHURCH**

by Gary Farley

The material that follows is drawn from experiences and reflections upon more than a decade of experience as a bivocational pastor in rural and village settings, discussions and interviews with many who serve in this setting, and from reading and hearing the insights of close observers of small churches such as Carl Dudley, Lyle Schaller, and Garland Hendricks. It remains open-ended, realizing that it is not yet a complete list.

1. While the quality of your sermons is important, the caring quality of your life is even more so—i.e., a pastor is remembered kindly and loved more for what he was and did in the sick room than behind the pulpit.
2. Small churches have character, but more so, characters, and they are usually very visible.

Remembered saints

Jokers and story-tellers

Worker bees

Matriarch/patriarch (decision-makers) or taproots of family clans

"Central" or a junction of persons in the communication network

Organizers

Handicapped

Marginal position—who may keep us honest

Gatekeeper—bridge to denominational world and assimilator of the new person into the congregation

3. A congregation may or may not want the leadership of a pastor, may or may not need much pastoral leadership, and yet actual needs and wants for leadership may not mesh.
4. Styles of leadership vary and they should match the character of the pastor, the needs of the congregation and the context. Types may include—
 - Corporate—director
 - Coach-enabler
 - Parson—relational/family
 - The Big Fisherman—charisma
5. Generally, in a normal, everyday context small churches operate more like a family than a corporation. Yet most pastors are trained in seminary to use corporate management principles and practices.

6. Usually, the new, the plateaued, and the dying congregation needs an aggressive leader for change to occur—a stable, going concern needs a "lover."
7. Events should be quality—some things the people can talk about—and of enough frequency that they can keep talking.
8. Pastor is a sacred role, one that bestows great power—
do not abuse it—ego/sex
but use honestly—awe/uneasy
find ways and places to get out of this awesome role/get "off-stage" be able to laugh at yourself.
9. Like a family, a small church will have some conflicts—some of these are chronic and endemic, some of them the church will outgrow, some may be managed, some resolved. Identifying the difference, there is the rub.
10. And criticism is bound to come. Some of it is useful, some of it laughable, some of it is understandable when the source is considered, but some of it is satanic. Again, discerning the difference is not easy.
11. It is unlikely that your church will reach everyone in your community. Yet this does not excuse you from trying.
12. People are evangelized. Members are adopted into the family of the small church. This calls for intentional effort, particularly where other bonds (kin or work) do not exist.
13. Change from one size category (e.g., Schaller's "Cat," "Collie" and "Garden") to another is usually very painful. "Our church is not the same anymore." And it isn't.
14. "A small congregation is where everyone knows or wants to know about everyone else."—Dudley
15. If the basic roles/critical mass are not present in a congregation, the situation is probably grave.
16. A small church pastor must be a generalist, not a specialist.
17. Each church has its "story" about its heroes, its victories, its funny events, and even its disasters or near disasters and failures. The story is often the glue that holds the congregation together.
18. The people come for fellowship, anchorage, adulation, entertainment, joy, support, worship. Exclusive attention to one is not wise.
19. When the church begins to "kid" or tease you, and when you are freely given important

leadership, you know that you are being accepted.

20. The small church develops its rhythm, its rituals, its roles and its stories. These make things comfortable. Be careful about the challenging any of them.
21. Beyond the implications of these points, the church has expectations for its pastor—personality, character, style, performance of pastoral role, et cetera. These need to be discussed on the front-end of the relationship.
22. You may need to learn to appreciate the culture—food, fun, stories, traditions and idioms of the place. This can be done without "going native."
23. Be an advocate for your people and their needs, e.g., textiles, agriculture.
24. It is difficult for a pastor to be effective where there are problems in his family. Sources of problems are often role expectations and economics.
25. One of the good results of past rural church program efforts has been to lead churches to plan, budget, and set goals. Some places this still must be accomplished. To do so will move a church from being a "preaching station" to being a church.
26. Broad involvement of persons in activities of the church is key to bonding them to the body. If they have invested themselves in the church, they are less likely to drop out. (At least until they hit the 55 syndrome.) Do it intentionally.
27. Another effort of the rural church movement was to get them to assume the role of salt, light and leaven in their communities. Much work in this area is still needed for many town and country Southern Baptist churches.
28. Churches get reputations in their community. What is yours? What can be done to improve it?
29. Go to a church and put down roots as though you will be there for a long, long time. Do not run. Much of the best work is done after the fifth year.
30. Yet, realize you probably will leave sometime. So major on basics, so that the next pastor can build on your efforts. Prepare the church to love the next guy, too, and do not pout when they do.
31. God must love small churches—He made so many of them.
32. Through associations, small churches can have access to resources, personnel, programs, and activities of a specialized nature, like the big churches.
33. Through ASP, different churches can identify and do specialized ministries, while others do another, and ultimately a good variety of needs are met.

34. Places with a limited population and/or extreme poverty will likely never be able to support a church financially. Therefore, we can abandon, use missionaries, or rely on bivocational or lay pastors in this setting.
35. If you are lost in the country, remember that the ruts at the crossroads lead toward town.
36. There is a reason why things are where they are in the church, and a reason why things are done the way they are done. So be really sure that it is broken before you attempt to fix it.
37. Preachers come and go, but the members stay put. Do not expect them to choose up sides over you.
38. Most small churches consider the "denomination" to be the association.
39. Typically, established churches have difficulty in reaching newcomers. Roles, rituals, and rulings are already firmly established. So the immigrant is uncomfortable and may opt to form a "down home" congregation as a place of retreat in this "strange land."
40. In seeking new members, the young church uses a "shotgun," and the old church a "rifle."
41. One of the best cures for passivity is to involve five—ten percent of the adults in a venture that involves them in an expression of their faith with other Christians in some other part of the world.
42. The axiom that "nothing succeeds like success" is evident in church programs.
43. A balance, conceived in dialogue with context between the two foci:
 - (a) Service to the needs of the existing congregation;
 - (b) Outreach to the unchurched.
44. The church is not a business. Needs are for leadership, not management. Efficiency is less important than faithfulness and effectiveness.
45. Since it is difficult to assimilate new folk in old groups, new groups should be started.
46. People join groups either to meet felt needs or to foster a goal.
47. Although contextual factors and group norms and resources are very important, the appropriateness of the leadership skills, style, and character of the leader may be even more significant to success.
48. What do you do with a bushel of lettuce or a string of fish given to you on Saturday night?
49. You know that you are in trouble when there are more volunteers for service in the nursery (or as parking lot watchman) than are needed.

50. At the local level, ecumenism is often very real and strong. Woe be the pastor who fights against it.
51. It may take three or four generations for a family to become "accepted" in a traditional rural community. This is because such places are organized in terms of networks of relationships. Assimilation of a family takes time. It must be bonded in several generations and in various levels.
52. Once a congregation gets established—building is built and paid for and programs are in place—there is a tendency for it to lose enthusiasm. This is why dreaming again the dream is an important activity.
53. In a relational congregation, people are "appointed" to office, even when a process of election is normative and is followed.
54. Pastors in rural/small town settings are valued in terms of their capacity to be known and liked in the larger community.
55. The "opinion-makers" and "action-makers" are key community/church persons. Their role is based on their past performances and/or their family role. They can make or break a ministry.
56. Ordination is more a matter of affirmation than of confirmation, i.e., conferring gifts.
57. Generally, it is the wisest policy to conform to role expectations concerning dress, manner, and demeanor if no vital issue of conscience is involved.
58. Ministers are not superhuman. They need pastoral care also.
59. In order to love others, one must love him/her self. The key is forgiveness.
60. It is important to be "up front" about expectations—yours for the church and the church for you and your family.
61. A minister is to live with the dialectic of the Jacob lifestyle. On the one hand, he is pilgrim subject to moving on, while on the other digging wells as though he would remain there for the rest of the journey.
62. Be realistic about your acceptance by the congregation. Real, but not deep.
63. Deal with anger—yours/theirs. Seek to resolve conflict.
64. Affirm your humanity. Realize that others often bear unrealistic expectations.
65. Ours is a competition culture. Pressure comes to be competitive, but the ministry calls more

for cooperation.

66. The expectation that you be a model family is real stressing. And some folk will test you.
67. In preparing a resume, be honest, but direct it to the needs of the congregation you are seeking—so that they will want to look at you carefully. Be concise and clear.
68. Move carefully to a church where there is a "fit" of needs, skills, and personality.
69. List the roles you are expected to play—preacher, prophet, priest, teacher, pastor, administrator, organizer, community model, lover, and bell boy.
70. Be flexible. It is too easy to confuse requested changes in your program with criticism of your program.
71. Accept the proper authority of groups in the church and they will confer upon you power, e.g., the WMU.
72. Ministry requires both strength and gentleness. A pastor must be secure in his/her gender.
73. The gospel calls for maturity more than actual perfection.
74. Make a realistic assessment of the things you do well or badly.
75. Become a good listener, rememberer, care-giver. (Love me, love my children.)
76. Discover what Bible stories and topics the church would like for you to treat in the sermons.
77. Within a month, if a person's worship habits change—make personal inquiry.
78. Teach something regularly.
79. Do not complain about the church or about the denomination.
80. When you make a mistake, ask for forgiveness.
81. Administration (attention to details) is important. Plan. Organize. Motivate.
82. No module of time should include more than one responsibility.
83. Communication is vital because people usually are down on what they are not up on.
84. Expectations are high when a new pastor arrives. This is a time to set goals and begin work. But make sure the goals are mutually owned.
85. The mores of a successful congregation are—inclusiveness, affectionate, theologically aware, and hopeful.

86. In planning—(a) think future—20 years, (b) think wide—not tied to old ways.
87. We work with volunteers—this opens up opportunity both for joy and for frustration.
88. People come to church expecting to be fed from God's word. Do not disappoint them.
89. Introspection in excess can kill a church. Excitement about world missions can breath life into it.
90. While social concerns are very important, be careful not to be too far out ahead of the congregation, nor focus on social issues to the neglect of the needs of the membership.
91. People vote with their feet and their purses. One can win a vote for his program in business meeting only to be frozen out.
92. The congregation needs to feel accepted, considered and loved by the wife of the pastor.
93. Do not be a Don Quixote. Pick your windmills carefully.
94. Be in charge in a conflict situation.
95. The hardest job is to alter attitudes. Be patient.
96. Be able to share prayer requests, being prayed for and experiencing joy over answered prayer are very important in the life of many members. This is the glue of the congregation.
97. Do not take yourself too seriously.
98. But take yourself seriously enough.
99. God is still God.