

Rural Church/Relational Church
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Often I have been asked, “What is the difference between large suburban and small rural churches?” The answer came to me one Sunday about a year ago as I looked out over the congregation of Aliceville Baptist Church. Four and five generations of a family, in fact of several families, were spread out across a pew. Pew after pew. Kinship ties and extended family relationships are important bonding agents in rural and small town churches. Old rural churches are relational churches—in at least two ways. Kinship connections and enduring relationships abound. Most of the young adults at Aliceville that morning were there with parents and grandparents, as well as their children. Also present were some of their public and Sunday School teachers from years ago. So, was the physician who had presided at their birth, their barber from childhood, the store owner for whom they had worked as teenagers, not to mention a host of cousins and in-laws. The relational web of their lives set around them worshipping God together. Contrasting with this is the new suburban church which is often a “gathering of strangers”.

Aliceville celebrated 175 years of life in 1998. Some of today’s members can trace their lineage back to the early days of congregational formation. Contrasted with this is the life expectancy of many city churches, 50 years or less. Consequently, one will find in many rural, relational churches a “spirit of being” which is quite different than that of suburban churches. No one can remember when the church was formed, and no one can imagine when it will no longer be.

A third important factor that may distinguish a small rural church from a large suburban one is that its heritage lies with strong lay leadership of the congregation. Of the 31 Baptist congregations in Pickens Baptist Association in rural western Alabama today, only four had a resident pastor, and weekly worship 50 years ago. The others were led by the laity of the church. While today only two of the 31 do not worship each Sunday, the heritage of lay leadership continues to be particularly strong in the rural churches of the association. Consequently, decisions about church life are colored by their probable impact on the harmony of the “family”.

For those rural Baptist churches whose founding and roots are deep in the 19th Century, there is a fourth basic relational characteristic. The foundational document of the life of the church was a covenant to which the founding members subscribed and pledged their accountability. As new converts and others asked to unite with these churches, each was asked to accept and live by the promises of the covenant of that church. All across the rural South I have seen copies of a church covenant framed and prominently displayed on the wall of most churches. I believe that this speaks of a relational legacy which demands that those who comprise the congregation must care deeply about the spiritual development, as well as the material well-being, of their fellow church members.

The point is that those who work with rural small churches need to understand that our rural, small churches are not embryonic large suburban churches. They do not have the same heritage, culture, understanding, or world view. They do not have the same future. To hold up the large suburban church as the model or ideal church is to miss the majority of the churches

that are members of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Those who have contended that we should not try to do church in the modern suburbs like we did it in the rural villages are correct. But they must attend the reverse of that statement. What works in the suburban large church may not be the way to do church in rural and small town ones. Leadership styles, programs, and strategies that are blessed in suburbia, may court disaster in a rural relational church. Let me share a case study of a good rural, relational church by way of illustrating all of this.

Case study

“The Church at Hickory Grove” is among the Southern Gospel songs recorded by the group known as Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver. It lauds the good and spiritual times and memories tied to a small rural church set in Upper East Tennessee. That Hickory Grove was for the singers much like Bethel for Jacob. It was a place where the presence of God was particularly real.

In recent weeks I have been getting acquainted with another Hickory Grove, one with similar characteristics, in the tip of western Alabama’s Appalachian foothills. It dates from 1894 and is named for its original location. About 1920 it moved to Liberty, a small village that had grown up around a rural high school. During the first third of this century it was a part of a four church field which included Pine Grove, Mineral Springs and Ethelsville. The school was lost to consolidation in the 1960s. Commercial establishments have closed. Hickory Grove and a volunteer fire department are all that anchors the community today.

My Hickory Grove has always been a small, rural congregation. It sits at a crossroads in a grove of hickory trees planted by the membership at the time of its relocation. It is comprised of a cluster of three connected, brick buildings—auditorium, education, and fellowship hall. Like many rural churches the interior is paneled with veneer plywood. The auditorium will seat about 100. From left to right across the front of that room is a door to the fellowship hall, a table with an open Bible on it, the pulpit stand on a low platform with the Lord’s Supper table in front on it, a cabinet which contains a tape deck, and a piano in the corner. On the wall over the tape deck cabinet hang the boards which report attendance and offerings for Sunday School and Discipleship Training. Enrollment for both is in the mid-40’s. Attendance for both is in the upper 30’s. On the wall to the right hangs a copy of the basic Baptist Church Covenant. Hymnals are from Memphis, not Nashville.

Mickey, the pianist, was not shy about her playing. She pounded out lively Southern Gospel tunes and the congregation sang joyfully from their limp-backed gospel hymn books. . Three of the five “special music” presentations at a revival service which I attended were, however, accompanied by tapes of orchestras playing the song that was being sung. This seemed incongruous to me. Fiddles, not violins, are the appropriate sound for Hickory Grove.

George Shaw has been pastor of this church for 11 years. He is a slight, greying man of about 45. He works with several of the men in the church cutting and hauling timber, often within the church community. He appeared to be a joyful, loving person with the gift of gab. His wife lovingly described him as being like a fly—busy flitting about. At a fellowship meal following the worship service, I heard a lot of playful banter between him and the 30 plus persons who attended. George related that he had been over to Ethelsville for the Sunrise Service that morning and had complained about how cold the metal chair in the graveyard was, until God

reminded him of how George had not complained about the cold of the early mornings the past couple weeks when he was out hunting turkeys. The conversation continued with a discussion about the plans of two young men in that church to go, along with four from neighboring churches, to New Mexico soon to hunt still more turkeys. I was reminded that hunting and fishing for the men and cooking tasty food for the women were important markers of status in rural church fellowships. (As is making music, “knowing the Bible”, and being acquainted with missionaries serving in foreign lands.)

In the hallway connecting the auditorium and the fellowship hall hangs at least a dozen banners awarded for having the highest attendance, actual and percentage, at Associational Discipleship Training events across the years. This church program is led by Larry Abrams, the older brother of a central family in Hickory Grove. These banners are as much a testimony to Larry’s role in the family and in the church as it is to the desire of the folk at Hickory Grove to get training and be inspired at this meeting.

According to the records of the Pickens Baptist Association, in 1947 Hickory Grove had a total of 43 members with 25 enrolled in Sunday School. It had worship only on the second Sunday of each month. The preacher was paid only \$15. 00 for each service. The total income of the church for that year had been about \$500. This past year the receipts of the church reached almost \$40,000. Of this \$2,000 was given to the association and only \$1,000 to the Cooperative Program. With 43 resident members, Hickory Grove averaged 41 in Sunday School attendance and nearly 50 in morning worship. Evening numbers were nearly the same. It supports the basic programs of a Southern Baptist church.

It appears that when the church meets, almost everyone is there. Participation in Hickory Grove seems to be spread broadly across the age spectrum. It is reaching a high percentage of the potential within its area of ministry. The fellowship appears healthy. Its style of worship seems to fit its community. My sense is that it has been effective in reaching people across the past 50 years. It has been fortunate to have stability of pastoral leadership with two pastors serving most of this period. Now, consider the relational nature of the culture of Hickory Grove.

Defining Culture

Anthropologists and sociologists define culture as including the world view and the set of values, beliefs, behavior patterns or roles, and artifacts that characterize a specific population. It is the glue that bonds a people. The scholars continue that these elements become inter-related and cluster around some central traits. In the rural South, particularly the upland areas, many of these cultural elements and traits are drawn from Celtic culture and were imported by the Scottish-Irish who settled the region. It is easy to see how the emphasis on hunting and fishing for men is grounded in that heritage.

Other contributing cultural elements which can be found in our rural Baptist churches of the South are those related to the loss of the Civil War, plantation culture, race relation patterns, vocational activities, kinship patterns, and our Baptist ecclesiology and theology. Some other, often more specific elements, would include social class, military experience, generational differences, the history of a particular church and its community, shared experiences, church leadership (clan leaders), and values imported from the larger, modern culture.

Those of us who seek to service rural churches in the South need to understand, work out of, and sometimes seek to change elements in their culture. The place to begin is with reading the

artifacts. Recall those things visible as one enters the auditorium of Hickory Grove.

- *Open Bible—the Protestant heritage of the priesthood of believers

- *Pulpit at the center—the Calvinist heritage of the “preached word”

- *The Table—the Lord’s Supper is for the people

- *Attendance boards—accountability for the work of the church

- *Piano and tape deck—role of music in worship

- *Church covenant—Baptist understanding that one unites with a church because he or she has experienced salvation and want to become a part of a congregation in order to be discipled and to disciple others.

*Missing from Hickory Grove, but present in many rural Baptist churches, is a baptistry. This artifact declares our commitment to immersion of believing persons, not babies.

This collection of artifacts in the line of sight at a rural Baptist church declares what is central in the life of the congregation. If it were a Methodist, or a Roman Catholic, or a Holiness church the set of artifacts would not have been the same. Further, the cluster of three connected buildings at Hickory Grove can be seen as a testimony to the central functions of their church—worship, discipling and nurturing, and fellowship. And other important functions—ministry, mission, and evangelism—surface as one learns about the valued activities of this church.

One will find other artifacts—pictures on the walls, banners, choir lofts, mourner’s benches, deacon corners, and storage rooms piled high with things used in the annual events of the church. These artifacts also have stories to tell about the culture of the church. Further, a study of budget and calendar, and the use of space beyond the worship center will tell you much about what is valued and how a particular rural church lives out ministry. A pastor who comes into one of our rural churches would do well to preach a series of sermons dealing with the deep meaning of each of these artifacts.

Secondly, one needs to observe the standard *behavior patterns* and *roles* in the church. Brothers Abrams and Shelton were the greeters at the door when I arrived. Brother George had become the pastor, indeed, because of his tenure, so visited with those who arrived for the service after they found their seats. The music was handled by two talented women who transparently enjoyed their roles as worship leaders. In the fellowship hall I met two other women who seemed to have the roles of the Mary and the Martha for Hickory Grove. An older fellow, whose name I did not catch, seemed to share the role of church jester with pastor George. He also served as “the candy man”. The “church mother” was there and was deferred to. I did not find the “aginer” or the “border guard”. I figure that he was present, but not needed, on this occasion. My point is that there are some standard roles in a rural church which must be filled. They are at least as important as the “church program” positions. If we are to assist rural churches we need to know who holds these functions and help them perform the roles appropriately and well.

Related, are agreed upon behavior patterns. One is how the preacher is expected to preach and to pastor. Another set relates to gender roles and relationships. For example, at Hickory Grove the men clustered together, and so did the women, and so did the youth before the service. But during the service families sat together. In all the rural churches I have known, children have been an important focus and highly valued. Programs, musicals, organizations work at passing the faith on to the children and preparing them to serve in the church as they grow up. A child who grows up in a good rural church is truly blessed.

One will find elaborate role expectations related to grief, conversion, revival services and so forth. For example, each of the presenters of “special music” in the service at Hickory Grove

prefaced their offering by thanking the congregation for the invitation, demeaning their gifts with humility, and asking the hearer to focus on the words of the song which they shared.

The *world view* and *values* of a rural church may be identified by listening to the music selected, the sermons preached, and to standard “prayer lines”. When I served as pastor at Gist’s Creek in Sevier County, Tennessee, hardly a Sunday passed without someone praying this line—“I want to thank you, Father, for letting me live one more week so that I could come out here today and worship You with my friends and neighbors”. I imagine that this line came from a much earlier time when life in the Smoky Mountains was made dangerous by wild animals, feuds, and accidents in the woods. There we sang “I’ll Fly Away” at least once each Sunday. I interpreted that to reflect the importance placed by this rural congregation on life in Heaven after death. Further, the congregation was critical of the general American culture as portrayed in the media. Gist’s Creek and Hickory Grove folk tend to be “local” in their world view, rather than “cosmopolitan” or global. Certainly, cable TV has impacted this, but I see it as still being real and deep in the church culture. (Of course, there are “cosmopolitan” churches in rural settings.) During Discipleship Training class when I attended Hickory Grove for a second time, just a week after a terrible storm had passed through the community, several folk recounted stories of how God had spared them harm. God appears to be a very active presence in every day life for them. This belief resides at the core of their process of interpreting life experiences, good and bad.

Covenant

A large framed copy of the standard Baptist Church Covenant is among the artifacts that one finds prominently displayed at Hickory Grove. For many suburban raised Baptists this is not part of their church experience and culture. So it merits a brief explanation. At least 25 of the other 30 churches in Pickens Association also display a church covenant. (Some of the others have their own “home crafted” covenant.) This is a “relational” document dating from the 19th Century. It is a “family” document. It is based on the concept that a person unites with a church because he or she has been born again and wishes to cooperate with other Christians, “a family of God”, in living and growing and extending the work of God. In the spirit of Ephesians 5:21 the members subscribed to a covenant of “mutual submission” in which their pledged to be accountable to one another. They are to pray, care, admonish, help and love one another. They are to support the church and live virtuous lives. This seems to be the nature of the life of many rural, small churches. Their very smallness and localness help to make this possible. (It seems to me that the modern Promise Keepers movement is driven by many of the values expressed in this covenant by our rural, relational churches, although it draws mostly for suburban places.)

Certainly, most rural churches have not always been as pure and good as they might have been. Like marriage covenants, church covenants are frequently forgotten or blatantly violated. They have to be reaffirmed and committed to. They need to be in the hearts and minds of the members as well as on the wall. They need to come alive in relationship.

Contrasts

Perhaps, the contrasts I have listed in the chart attached to this article will serve to summarize some of the major cultural differences between a large, modern suburban congregation and an old rural one. Most of those who live in cities and work for denominational

agencies participate in the former, and increasingly those who seek seminary training are coming from large suburban churches, but will have their first pastoral experience in a small, relational, rural church, so it should be helpful for us to contrast the two. Please note that they are very different organisms, although they are both expressions of the Body of Christ. Resources that will help the one will not fit the other. My sense is that the Large Suburban model is rapidly becoming the “ideal” in Southern Baptist life. So, as this type is held up for praise and serviced, care must be exercised to not neglect or denigrate the small, rural church. It is not likely that the Hickory Groves of the rural South will be able to become “full-service” congregations serving a thousand or more worshipers each week. Our focus should be to help them be healthy churches serving their social and cultural setting. They will not be going away. (See Gary Farley and D. G. McCoury, *We're Family: Help for the Smaller Membership Church*, Convention Press, 1992. And Doran McCarthy, *Leading the Small Church*, Broadman Press, 1991.)

Conclusion

We have looked at how our rural churches are relational in four primary ways. One is that because it has been in existence for several generations, the congregation has intermarried and kinship connection abound. Typically, a new pastor is advised not to say anything derogatory about one member to another because they are probably kin. And in a few months the pastor observed that this relationship web is true, indeed. Second is to maintain a friendly relationship with another church member may outweigh rational choices. For example, an aging person needs to relinquish the role of church pianist, the congregation know it, but they are not willing to do anything that might hurt the pianist. So, they do not take action. Third is the concept of being a covenanted body, or a spiritual family. They are bound by an agreement to care, aid, love, and call one another to accountability. Fourth, the pastor is often seen as “the preacher”. He preaches a sermon, but the true pastor of the folk is often a lay leader or two. Only when a minister stays with a congregation for a long while, can he become the pastor as well as the preacher.

These relational characteristic describe most small, rural churches. And these form the majority of the congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist family. To keep faith with the Covenant of the Twenty-first Century, which promises that the agencies of the denomination will be sensitive to serving the needs of each congregation, we need to work with these churches in terms of their relational nature.