

Issues Related to Rural Church Life

Gary Farley

The researchers for the recent rural church study in Missouri interviewed church leaders and pastors in about 400 congregations across that state. They asked about the problems and advantages of rural churches as such and about the advantages and disadvantages of pastoring rural churches. Below I have collected and summarized the comments. I did not, however, try keep track of the frequencies of the comments.

Note that a particular characteristic might appear both as an advantage and as a problem. Also, the lists may contain contradictory observations. (For example, some listed a lack of money as a problem, and others listed the availability of money as an asset.) This is alright because of contextual differences. And some of the churches are healthy and others are not. Again, note that this is a compilation of responses. As such, it is not correct or in error. It is simply a report of what the interviewers heard.

Problems noted by our respondents which make rural ministry difficult clustered around the following 10 topics:

1. Aging congregation.
2. Traditional or local in perspective and not open to change, or welcoming of the new persons, methods, programs.
3. Lack of young people in the church.
4. Shortage of money and other resources
5. Declining population base in the area served.
6. Unable to offer a variety of programs and activities due to limited number of persons active in the congregation..
7. Too few people with leadership abilities and training in the congregation.
8. Hard to keep a minister for the church.
9. Competition from secular activities.
10. Remaining true to the Gospel and proclaiming it properly in an age of secularity.

Conversely, the advantages that rural ministry offers seems to cluster around these 10 topics:

1. Its relational, "like family", atmosphere.
2. Dedicated workers who are reliable.
3. Allow the pastor to be a shepherd/leader.
4. Deeply involved in ministry to one another and to the community.
5. Strong financial support to address the needs of the church and its ministry.
6. Actively supportive of the world missions enterprise.
7. Deep abiding faith that has carried many through difficult times, helping them to grow spiritually.
8. Open minded and accepting of new ideas.
9. Supportive of other small churches.

10. Love is experienced in the congregation.

The problems that rural pastors may have to confront, or otherwise deal with can be congregated around these 10 topics:

1. Small town mentality, conservative, pre-modern in thinking, resistant to change, suspicious of the "different".
2. Limited access to some modern conveniences and cultural activities close at hand.
3. Time constraints related to serving bivocationally, or in a multi-point charge.
4. Constraint of opportunities to grow a church to a larger, more active size.
5. Poor self-image for self and church.
6. Struggles over traditions that seem to stifle vision and change.
7. Sacrifices by spouse and children related to living in a rural area.
8. Sense of being "under-employed" or lacking challenges that are related to ones gifts and training.
9. Stress related to the dysfunctionality of persons in the community; e.g. gossip, addictions, and abuses.
10. Lack of material resources in the church to provide the kind of ministry that one wants to be able to provide.

And, the advantages for those of us who do rural ministry are identified and collected in this list of 10:

1. Enjoyment of the intimacy and familiar nature of the congregation.
2. The depth of relationships with congregants which makes meaningful shepherding ministry possible.
3. People who are willing to follow their pastor and are open to new ways of doing things.
4. Relationships with mature Christians who have a deeply rooted spirituality.
5. Relaxed pace in the community.
6. Acceptance and affirmation by the church and community.
7. Involvement in the larger life of the community and its institutions.
8. Working with church leaders who really care deeply about ministry to others.
9. Able to move around the community feeling known and knowing.
10. The sense that one's life is counting for something vital.

One observation that comes to mind from reading this report is that there are apparently some very healthy rural churches and some that are sick. Further, there are some pastors who are very happy with the church(es) that they serve, and others who are unhappy and/or disheartened. Often the two are connected; that is, the health church and the happy pastor are serving one another.

If these lists capture the issues in rural church life, and I believe that they do, how can ISG folk prepare the ministerial students to understand, work within these constraints, draw upon the positive elements, address the negative, and thrive in such a setting, if only for a season?