

*The Baptist Program*

## **How To Become a 30-Mile Church**

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He certainly didn't set out to do so. He probably didn't intend to do so. It may have been more a consequence of change than a cause. However, community boundaries in rural America have been redrawn. The Wal-Mart town has become the dominant community across the landscapes. Sam Walton's success story of planting nearly 2,000 discount stores, mostly in rural places, has certainly altered community patterns. And since churches relate to communities, church life too will be different.

### THE THIRTY MILE RURAL CHURCH

The basic fact is that the old six-mile communities in which America was settled and churchied in the 19th century are being replaced with 30-mile communities. When Wal-Mart comes to town, other chains and franchises follow. Retail trade shifts from the crossroads village and hamlets to the Wal-Mart town. Typically, this town draws consumers from about 15 miles in each direction. As it does, the economic function of the villages within 15 miles of the Wal-Mart town dries up. Often schools are consolidated into the Wal-Mart town as are other services. Many times a sense of psychic depression grips the village as its stores and school are boarded up.

From the perspective of rural sociology, the eight to fifteen villages that lie within expanded trade and service areas of the emerging Wal-Mart town, are becoming like neighborhoods with a city. That is, people live in these villages and around them, but they work and shop and have most of their needs met in the Wal-Mart town. If you will look at a map, let me give you an example. Take Johnson County, Missouri. Scattered across it are the villages of Pittsville, Columbus, Fayetteville, Valley City, Kingsville, Centerview, Montserrat, Knobnoster, Latour, Quick City, Medford, Chilhowee, Holden, Post Oak and Leeton. Near the center is Warrensburg. Most of the villages are along railroad lines. Before 1950, most of them had stores, a school, a bank, a church or churches, a physician or two, and a grain elevator. Today, most of these institutions, other than the churches, have been consolidated and expanded in Warrensburg. So, most of the villages are low density neighborhoods of Warrensburg or Johnson County. This same pattern is repeated again and again across rural America.

In most instances, far fewer people live in and around these villages than did in 1950. And many of those who do, spend much of their time away from the village. Whereas, a Chilhowee, or a Kingsville once played a primary role in the life of its citizens, it has been reduced to a secondary or a tertiary role. Will the village and rural church follow the lead of businesses and the professions? Will these churches die and be replaced by churches in the Wal-Mart town? Perhaps for some. Not necessarily for all.

Logic would seem to suggest that the prospects for village and open country churches in places losing function and population is not good. Most of these see themselves serving a "church field" that extends about three miles in each direction. And this field is in decline. Adding to their woe, frequently, is the fact that one or more of the churches in the Wal-Mart town is aggressively becoming a "full-service," 30-mile church. It offers programs and activities for children, youth, young families and seniors. It has fine facilities including a family life center. It has a staff of well-trained specialists. Its demands on most members are limited. Like a "religious" Wal-Mart, it offers what most folk want at a price they can afford. Often the village pastor sees car after car of well-scrubbed families drive past his little church the 6, 12 or 15 miles to the big one in Wal-Mart town. When he visited the families, he was told, "We like your church, but the programs at the big church meet the needs of \_\_\_\_\_" What is the little church to do?

### THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES

I believe that Sam Walton offers some principles that are applicable for the churches outside the emerging Wal-Mart town in his recently published autobiography.<sup>1</sup> First, resist the temptation to take on the big Wal-Mart town church head-to-head. The village or country church cannot do what the large church can do any more than a small hardware store, clothing shop, or dry goods store can compete with Wal-Mart.

Second, find a niche. Walton, for example, advised the hardware store to major on service; that is, train its clerks to help the homeowner understand how to do a repair job and what to get to do it with. His idea is that the smaller store can find a need that the mass merchandiser is unable to meet and supply it. I see some village and open country churches doing just this. One has become the country and western option for folk in a large Wal-Mart town. Trail rides, ministries at rodeos and a gospel string band are among its activities. It draws people from all around who want to ride horses, make music and be around rodeos. It will never become a large church, but its a very healthy one. It is reaching people that the big town churches cannot. People drive past them on the way to this distinctive church.

Another rural church found itself gifted with persons with skills in drama. It decided to produce a passion play during Easter Week. And, although it is far from the Wal-Mart town, people came. Thousand attend annually. This church found a niche. It created an identity. It performs a ministry.

Still another rural church hit on the idea of ministering to "home schooler" families. The pastor and his wife recognized that a great need of "home schooled" children is to socialize with other children. And the parents needed a support group. So they networked the "home schooler" families and invited them to their church on a weekday afternoon for a time when the children could play together and the parents could share resources and techniques. In time, several of these families became a part of their church.

Other examples abound. All across the country, village and open country churches have realized that their ministry to a six-mile place was not working and that they could not compete with the big full-service church. So, they found a niche and applied the third principle from Sam Walton--they extended their field. They became a 30-mile church. That is, they actively sought to reach all those within the new 30-mile Wal-Mart town community, in which their old six-mile field was a neighborhood, who needed a particular service or who wished to provide a specific ministry. For many village and open country churches this seems to be their best hope for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Walton, Sam. Sam Walton: Made in America-My story. New York: Doubleday 1992.

#### NINE KEYS TO THE NEW RURAL COMMUNITY

So how does a church go about becoming a 30-mile, niche-oriented congregation? Here again Sam Walton's autobiography may offer some clues.

First, he recognized that he needed to change. He saw that the small variety store on the courthouse square in rural America was doomed. He could not compete in his current place and mode with the discounters. This is true for many rural churches.

Secondly, he listened. He listened to his customers, to those he wanted for customers, to his employees and to his competitors. He saw an opportunity to become the leading discounter in the small towns in the Mid-west. He learned how to do it. He pursued it with total commitment. He kept on learning. Listening and learning will need to be important characteristics of a village church that decides to become a 30-mile niche church. Crucial, of course, will be finding a niche for the church to serve. You discover this by asking questions and by listening. Needs, expectations, goals, hopes, comfort zone. If you listen long and well you will discover a ministry that can be the new "stackpole" for your church.

Third, think small. Walton said that he never abandoned thinking like a small town independent merchant. He wanted to be ever sensitive to the expectations of his customers. He made them number one. For him, success was measured in value given. Of course, being a church member is a much deeper relationship than buying a shopping cart full of clothing, tools and toys at a Wal-Mart. The sense of caring and being cared for is an important need for church members. Being "like family" is a quality that must be guarded.

Fourth, involve the people. Encourage each member to share the vision of the mission. In the quest to be a 30-mile church, also take care of the "front line" troops who are networking out across the area talking up the church, inviting, sharing their witness. See every role as vital. Reward. Encourage. As new folk are reached, seek to grow them from being consumers of ministry to being providers. Care for the family. Don't allow the quest to make members feel neglected.

Fifth, be enthusiastic. When a little village church measures itself by a big Wal-Mart church and when it compares the decline of its six-mile community with the growth of the Wal-Mart town, it is subject to depression. But, if it can find a good ministry which God blesses, then it can feel good about itself. The pastor needs to call attention to the victories being won through this ministry. God should be praised for His blessings. The worship should be a time of praise and inspiration. The church must come to recognize that it has an important role in God's plan for that 30-mile community.

Sixth, develop a corporate culture. Walton worked to develop a strong sense of "oneness" among his people. Pride, common values, active communication, and good support has characterized life in the stores and in the corporate office. Wisely, he also saw the potential danger in this. Pride in what a group is can blind them to needs and/or opportunities to change. So, he was careful to blend into the corporate culture an exciting openness to change. He was conquering mountains, but other peaks always beckoned. Here to, is a lesson for the old six-mile church. Always be permeable to new people, new challenges, and

expanded opportunities. An attitude of "We're great and we'd like for you to become a part of our great a family," should characterize these churches.

Seventh, constantly monitor what you are doing. Walton conducted a weekly Saturday morning meeting of his management team. They shared what they were seeing, sensing, hearing and doing. This made it possible for everyone to know where the corporation was going. Problems could be nipped in the bud. Church council and deacon body meetings can have a similar role in a church. Communication cannot be left to chance.

Eighth, take risks. Walton shared how he tried many different things and encouraged his managers to try things provided they were germane to the basic mission of the corporation. To move from being a stable six-mile village or open country church doing all the things Southern Baptist churches are supposed to do, to being a 30-mile church focused on a unique ministry will involve risk. Folks will say "But, we never did it this way before." True. However, if you can demonstrate that this is only a new means to a time-honored biblically-based function, many, if not most, will proceed in concert with you. Most of these churches long to recapture the excitement of "the glory years." What you are proposing is that this be accomplished in ways appropriate to the current context. It is a matter of finding, defining, selling, inspiring, equipping and leading in the accomplishment of the work God has for this church in this time.

Ninth, be a part of the new 30-mile community. Early on, Wal-Mart was criticized for taking from and contributing little to the community. This seems to have struck a responsive note in Sam Walton. He goes to great pains in his autobiography to rebut this criticism. The application to churches is obvious. As we move from being a church for a little six-mile community, perhaps, the church will need to refocus upon the concerns, events, and needs of the larger 30-mile community. Here it will be only one of several churches. Cooperation will be called for. Within the Southern Baptist family this can be sponsored by the association. Several are now working with old six-mile churches to identify a 30-mile ministry, equip the church to do, provide support from sister congregations, and applaud victories. The associational vision is that of a family of churches addressing various people groups, life-style groups and ministry needs. It seeks to make the slogan, "A Church for Everyone," a reality. The association will no longer seek to have 27 "look-a-like" churches. Now, there will be 27 or more congregations with 50 or more ministries targeting almost any group within its bounds.

#### CONCLUSION

Intentionally or not, Sam Walton was the creator, explorer, and mapper of the new 30-mile rural community. He achieved great success there. His observations seem to be applicable to church life. I have shared my thinking about this. I encourage you to do the same. I hope that many of you will seek to lead your six-mile rural church to become a 30-mile church. I hope that you can get your association to be an active player in this.

Finally, a note to the full-service Wal-Mart town church pastors. Most of what Sam Walton discovered is applicable to your church as well. With one difference. While doing your best to be the

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Wal-Mart type church, gently encourage the older six-mile churches to find a niche. Point some out. Support as a kingdom person your need to be almost as concerned about the health and well-being of the other churches as you are of your own. God has given to your church the awesome responsibility of leadership. In all likelihood His plan is not for only one church within that 30-mile community, but many different churches. As the lead church, you can enable this to happen.