

Rural Church Challenge_32105

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Rural Church Challenge

By Ken Camp

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Church growth experts insist a church is a living organism, and everything that's alive grows. But even the most avid advocates of church growth acknowledge it helps if the church is planted in fertile soil.

When it comes to growth potential, not all churches are created equal. Churches in communities experiencing population increases have an advantage over churches in declining areas.

Although the overall Texas population continues to grow, 117 Texas counties have lost population since 2000, said Clay Price, manager of research information services with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Three-fourths of those counties are in rural areas west of the Interstate 35 corridor.

Some rural church leaders ask: "In places where the best and the brightest move away after high school and jobs are in short supply, what is the proper way for a church to gauge success?"

Three-fourths of the Texas counties that have lost population in recent years are in areas west of I-35.

(BGCT Research & Information Services)

“Success for a church is measured by finding and doing the will of God for the congregation,” said Gary Farley, a partner with the Center for Rural Church Leadership. “This may be something other than what we have come to identify as success for a church—bigger budgets, new buildings and more bodies.”

Farley, director of missions for Pickens Baptist Association in western Alabama and former rural church consultant with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, pointed to the New Testament book of Ephesians. He noted the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus, listed unity, purity, mutual submission and focused attention as marks of a healthy church.

“I know small churches where this is the case,” he said. “The dynamics of multiple numbers make it more likely for this to happen there than in mid-size and large churches.”

Bill Wright, pastor of First Baptist Church in Plains, believes a rural church can diagnose its health by honestly answering a few questions: “Does the community know the church loves it? Does the community call on the

church-and do other churches call on a church-to do things? Does the rural church have a world view, where it's not just focused on its own culture but also reaching outside its culture?"

Wright noted, for instance, when First Baptist Church of Plains has offered disaster relief training, it has made it available to anyone-male and female, without regard to denomination.

"We've had Church of Christ, Methodists and Catholics involved. You can't be exclusive," he said.

That inclusive spirit includes making the church's physical resources available to anyone in the community, he added.

"It comes back to recapturing the philosophy of the church as the hub of life in the community," he said.

Practically speaking, Wright added one additional criterion for evaluating rural church health: "If you can maintain what you've got, that's growth. We graduate 12 to 15 kids each year. They go off to college and never come back. So we're growing by 12 to 15 if we stay dead even."

When young people leave their rural hometowns for colleges and careers, their churches and communities sustain a loss. But Pastor Buddy Helms of Bethel Baptist Church in Big Lake chooses to see small-town churches as missionary-sending agencies.

"We're living at the crossroads. We minister to people, and then they're gone," said Helms, who also is volunteer director of missions for Castle Gap Baptist Association.

"We have them for a little while, and then we send them out, kind of like missionaries. Of course, we have some who have been here forever and never plan to leave, and we minister to them. But for others, we minister

while we have them, and then we send the light out somewhere else."

Rather than measuring success by how many people the church can hold, Helms believes a church can chart its health better by asking how many people it can send out to minister--whether in their rural homeplace or somewhere else.

Unity of purpose, consideration for needy people and participation in local and worldwide missions all are gauges of church health, regardless of the size or remoteness of a community, said Bobby Broyles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Ballinger.

"Another question to ask is whether there is an active witness in the community," he added. "We have 4,300 people here, and I'm quite certain there are some of them who are not Christians."

Church members in small rural communities need to "take off their blinders" and not assume their non-Christian friends and neighbors will never change, Broyles stressed.

"It's too easy to forget the power of God and the power of prayer," he said, noting his church baptized representatives of three generations of the same family--a grandfather, his adult son and a junior high school-aged grandson--on the same Sunday earlier this year, and another family member came to faith in Christ later.

Broyles pointed out that even when he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Earth, a community of 1,000 people, he and the deacons kept a list of 90 men in their community for whose salvation they were praying.

Farley agreed. When the pond is small--and maybe even drying up--that's when a "fisher of men" really finds his commitment to Christ's Great Commission tested, he noted.

"Any old fisherman can catch his limit when the fish are biting and plentiful. Real fishermen are those who get fish in the difficult places," he said.

"In places where there are few prospects, a church may be more effective in terms of ratio of lost to conversions-and often are-than in places where there are many lost. As long as there is one 'lost sheep,' the good shepherd does not give up."

Bob Ray, director of bivocational and small-church development with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, emphasized a key way a rural church can expand its evangelistic vision is by redefining its church field beyond the traditional three- to five-mile "parish" approach.

Fairy Baptist Church in Hamilton Baptist Association, where Ray is longtime bivocational pastor, began to grow when it adopted what Farley calls a Wal-Mart approach.

"A church with a Wal-Mart mentality will ask how far people are willing to drive on a regular basis to do their shopping," Ray said. "If people are used to driving 35 miles to shop, they'll drive 35 miles to church. That's the church field."

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