

Rural churches struggle as resources flow to urban churches

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BNG)—It's not easy being a small, rural church in America today. Denominations sometimes focus more resources on bigger, urban congregations. And luring a pastor to the boondocks is a major challenge.



In small country churches, pews evoke memories of members long-passed. (Creative Commons photo by E. I. Sanchez) “Many seminary graduates will not even consider taking a smaller church,” said Dennis Bickers, southeast area resource minister for the American Baptist Churches of Indiana and Kentucky. “So, finding pastoral leadership is becoming increasingly challenging.”

Worse still, country and small-town dwellers increasingly choose to move to larger cities.

“More and more people are moving from the rural area to urban settings,” Bickers said.

Those people represent potential members.

“Trying to reach new people is a challenge, because we are in a time where people take their consumer mentality to church with them, not just to Walmart,” he said.

More traditional, more challenges

But those trends run counter to statistical realities.

While large churches dominate headlines, congregations with more than 1,000 members account for only about 2 percent of U.S. houses of worship. About 90 percent of churches average less than 350 in attendance, and about 50 percent average less than 75. Many of the smaller churches are found in more rural settings than the flashy megachurches that steal attention away from typical congregations.

All of this leaves members at smaller churches feeling overlooked when denominational staff, often from larger congregations themselves, focus more on urban areas, said Bickers, author of *The Healthy Small Church* and *The Art and Practice of Bivocational Ministry*.

Intentionality, he said, is one of the key needs in denominational life when it comes to serving the needs of rural churches. Bickers described his American Baptist region as “very intentional about recognizing the importance of smaller churches, rural churches.”

One area they need assistance in is finding capable leadership. He said it’s a particularly challenging issue for congregations in need of bivocational ministers.

Additionally, he sees societal trends as adding to the struggles of rural

churches.

“Smaller churches tend to be more traditional, so if people are not looking for that, it can become difficult,” he said.



Smaller, rural congregations present many blessings, including an intimacy among members. (Creative Commons photo by Steven Perez) Ministering in rural contexts offers unique blessings despite the challenges, said Melody Pryor, pastor of First Baptist Church of Stanton, Mo., and board secretary for Churchnet.

Stanton, an unincorporated city with a population of just a few dozen, sits on Interstate 44 between St. Louis and Rolla.

She sees “familiarity” as one of “the biggest blessings.”

“Many of the families have lived in the community for generations,” she said. “When someone asks for prayer for another person, chances are the other church members know that person. Either they went to school with them, they were a neighbor or they are a family member or married to a family, etc. Farmers seem to have a tendency to know who owns the

property next to theirs.”

Visitors

“Another blessing—unique to our location—is the visitors we receive,” Pryor added. “There is a KOA campground across the road from us and Meramec Caverns campground/motel just a couple miles down the road. We are also located on the famous Route 66 and on Interstate 44. We have had visitors from just about every state in the Union and from Canada, Australia and England.”

Bickers similarly sees special opportunities for rural churches.

“People in rural churches share common experiences,” he said. “That’s certainly a strength of these churches.”

“People are more important than programs,” he added. “You don’t have to audition to sing in the choir in most rural churches. Relationships are key. Everything in a small church, a rural church, revolves around relationships.”

And “people communicate quickly,” he said.

For instance, “if there’s a death, before the day’s done, details are worked out” like “who’s going to bring potato salad” and take care of other needs.

Rural poverty initiative

Mollie Palmer serves as the director of Together for Hope Arkansas, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship regional initiative.

“Together for Hope on a national level is CBF’s rural poverty initiative,” Palmer explained.

Several programs the ministry undertakes are in Phillips County on the

Mississippi River. They partner with local preschools, bring a “stories on wheels” school bus that has been refitted with bookshelves and work tables as a sort of traveling library and lead summer reading programs to stop “summer slide where people lose information over the summer because they are not engaged in reading,” Palmer said.

They also connect mentors with students who are reading below grade level. Leadership development is provided for youth through service projects, summer camp and a new college scholarship program, she said.

Challenges

But there are challenges, she added.

“People tend to focus their resources on urban areas, so you have to be a little more creative on how you focus your program” in rural areas, Palmer said.

“I never in a million years would have told you I would have ended up in a rural community,” she added, noting she grew up in a Little Rock suburb. “We, as a society, have kind of cast aside the rural community, and it’s not something that the cool kids do.”

Because the bulk of talent, resources and funds go to the urban centers, it leaves those who choose to live in rural areas going without, she said.

“You can make a big impact in a rural community,” she added. “Rural communities have a lot to offer.”