

RFD-OK, or DOA?

October 2, 2010

America's rural churches were built upon and grew from a strong sense of community. Although many rural congregations now are in decline, that community reliance may be the key to spiritual renewal and to thriving ministry.

Some rural church experts believe recovering a sense of community or building upon it may give congregations new life, not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in vitality and effectiveness.

"It may be time for rural church (members) to change from (the attitude) 'what can my church do for me' to 'what can my church do for my community,' said Fran Schnarre, director of educational ministries for the [Missouri School of Religion Center for Rural Ministry](#).

Community development

Some churches, such as Chatham (Va.) Baptist, are partnering with government, community service organizations and schools—and they are crossing denominational lines—to concentrate on transformation or redevelopment of their areas.

Chatham is among communities in a broad area called "Southside" Virginia that stretches from South Boston/Halifax to Chatham/Danville to Martinsville and where coordinated "reimagination" is taking place.

"Churches are involved in various ways, sometimes as lead innovators, and sometimes as stakeholders in the community," Pastor Chuck Warnock said. An expert in community collaboration, Warnock is a rural church

consultant and writes *Outreach* magazine's "Small Church, Big Idea" column.

Since 2004, Chatham Baptist has led or assisted in several community efforts, including starting a Boys and Girls Club, constructing the Community Center at Chatham and founding a community music school for children.

Freelance ministry developer and coach Julia Kuhn Wallace agrees community involvement reconnects the church to people. "Churches that get involved attract people to them," she said.

Wallace, a member of the [Rural Church Network](#) of the U.S. and Canada, previously served as director of the United Methodist Small Churches and Shared Ministry program. Forming partnerships can allow a community to provide some of the services and programs residents need or want.

"Less than 19 percent of rural populations experience a true decline in total population," Wallace said. "But most are experiencing a shift. Others move in but they are on the fringe of the community."

Many of the newcomers are the new rural poor—which puts a strain on the tax base, she added.

Wallace is seeing revitalization in those congregations that have chosen to partner with others to meet needs, she said.

Morality and ethics

"People still look to the church for spiritual activities," Wallace emphasized.

Even a small church can provide spiritual support. People need support for life changes and struggles they face. A congregation can connect to its community by offering programs such as Divorce Recovery or a prayer

ministry.

A retired professor of economics believes the church serves its community by taking the lead in sustainability efforts.

“It’s not just about science and economics and politics. ... It is a moral and ethical obligation,” noted John Ikerd, University of Missouri professor emeritus.

“If the church won’t do it, how can we expect others to do it?”

The church connects to the community by learning what rural living means to its residents. Congregations must take time to find out what people view as the community’s desirable qualities and what they want. Church members must discuss the quality of life beyond economic aspects, he said.

Tradition

Sometimes a congregation can lose itself in the glory of its past. But in some cases, tradition can be used to help residents reconnect to one another.

Rural communities in the past have been tightly knit, explained Kenny Sherin, a North Carolinian currently working on a doctorate in rural sociology at the University of Missouri. “Churches have a place in encouraging that sense of community,” he said.

Sherin served as pastor of Hester Baptist Church in Oxford, N.C., more than five years before moving to Missouri, where he and his wife share pastoral duties at Nashville Baptist Church, a rural congregation near Columbia.

A church can reconnect to its community by helping residents regain their

sense of place and heritage. “The church is one of the few institutions that often are still associated with the community,” he said.

In many small towns, the schools consolidated, and other institutions moved out. “The church is the only institution that can keep the heritage alive in their communities,” he said. They can use heritage as a way to draw people together and build community.

Find a niche

“Be a niche church,” advised Farley, director of missions for Pickens Baptist Association in Alabama and co-author of [*The Rechurching of Rural America*](#). Farley had served with the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board’s rural church program.

Congregations must no longer seek to be all things to all people within their church field. Instead, they must focus on the ministry they do best, he said.

Cowboy and biker congregations are the most recognized niche churches today, forming around the interest or lifestyle and meeting needs. Warnock cited a biker church that assists residents in finding jobs.

A church also can choose a ministry niche. While it isn’t known as a “children’s church,” Clarksburg (Mo.) Baptist Church realized its niche is ministry to children in its small town of about 400 residents. Located within walking distance of the community’s only school, the church offers an after-school program and several targeted activities, including summer sports camps. In about 15 months, Sunday school and worship attendance rose significantly, as did baptisms.

Fellowship gatherings can attract people who otherwise would not hear the

gospel. Arvon Baptist Church in Buckingham County, Va., provides a monthly Sunday morning breakfast that reaches 20 to 25 men.

Wallace is seeing a rise in senior adult ministries and in medical outreach through clinics for seniors and children. "I think the possibilities are endless," she said. "These times call for creative responses."

More than Sunday

A congregation's efforts to tap into or strengthen its sense of community will open opportunities to minister. "Exciting things can happen ... but it requires a lot of prayer ... and moving out beyond the church walls," Schnarre said.

"Rural and small-town churches will always exist, because people in small communities see church as more than just Sunday morning. Church in rural areas is part social gathering, part family reunion, part worship and study and part pastoral caregiver," Warnock explained.