

Some rural churches see their calling as providing a laboratory for training ministers

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WACO—Rural churches, particularly those within driving distance of a seminary or denominational college or university, often become training grounds for ministerial staff.

“Some churches see that as their ministry,” noted Judy Battles, coordinator for pastoral ministries at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary.

Churches within about a 100-mile radius often look to Truett for all types of ministerial staff. And lack of funds can be the driving force behind choosing a seminary student to fill a leadership position.

“Some (chose students) because that is what they can afford,” Battles added. “Some do it because they only need a part-time minister. But some do so because they see themselves as a training ground.”

The distinction comes in size rather than in location, she emphasized. Financial pressures also cause small churches in the area’s larger cities to consider calling a seminary student. “The smaller churches don’t generally have the funds a graduate would expect,” she said.

Tarris Rosell, professor of ethics and ministry praxis at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan., noted most students already are in a ministry position by the time they reach the practicum courses the seminary requires. And most serve in urban or suburban settings. But a few

rural churches near Kansas City have garnered reputations as training churches.

Elm Grove Baptist Church, an American Baptist congregation in Miami County, Kan., primarily called seminary students for several years. Noel MacClymont, who serves as volunteer coordinator at Central and has a reputation for taking students under her wing, is a member at Elm Grove.

Central graduate Jan Smith is the current pastor, the first female to lead the congregation founded in 1879. She has served nine years, just about the longest tenure of any pastor since 1970. The four pastors before her also had been students.

Although the congregation loved its pastors, they were ready to see if pastoral stability might help the church grow. “When I visited with the search committee, they acknowledged that they needed to do something, or they would die. They were averaging about 20 to 22, and they were determined they would do whatever it took to keep the church alive,” Smith explained.

Smith, who describes herself as a “second-career pastor,” attended seminary as a “more mature” student. The church became her training ground in pastoral duties and responsibilities, and she helped them see women as capable and gifted pastors.

Some members had no problem calling a woman as pastor, but others did. “It was a matter of them facing it point-blank,” Smith said.

The committee talked to a couple of other seminary students as well. Smith said she felt her maturity might have given her an edge that allowed the committee to look beyond gender.

She believes churches, especially small rural ones, may become more willing to consider women as pastors because of fewer options. “Generally

a small church, particularly if it is far away from a metro area, is more likely to consider a woman because their pool of resources for leaders is smaller," she said.