

Voices: The future of the rural church

December 13, 2021

I am worried about the future of the rural church. Please hear me when I say, I know without a shadow of a doubt the church will continue victorious, because God has promised to keep and sustain his people.

I am not worried about the church disappearing altogether. But, I do think hard days are ahead.

I have spent most of my ministry in small rural churches and currently serve as director of missions for a rural Baptist association. I love the rural church. We need more focus on the rural church.

One of the main problems in the next 10 to 20 years is going to be the multitude of pastors who will finish their ministries in rural churches. There is a generation of pastors who have been faithful to love small churches and communities well for many years. My concern is who replaces them when they are gone?

Many of the churches in my association are struggling to find staff members. They are not receiving many resumes for youth or children's ministry positions.

This seems to be a moment when there is a lack of younger ministers willing to come to rural places. Where will our next generation of pastors come from? What will so many of our smaller, rural churches do when the lack of youth ministers becomes a lack of candidates for pastorates?

When you look at the broader data on the shrinking of rural communities, I am afraid this problem will only grow.

We should celebrate the growth of the church in our cities and the ways we have to reach the nations in our urban areas, but please don't forget about the rural church.

The need

The future of the rural church needs faithful pastors.

We need strong, faithful churches and compassionate, convictional pastors. We need our schools and conventions to continue supporting, helping and championing our rural churches. We need people willing to give their lives to serve and minister in our rural churches.

Ministry students, please consider staying in the rural churches you came from or were kind enough to give you a start.

Pastors, please consider coming back to the rural church. I know it's not high profile, and you probably never will have anything written about your ministry, but it will make an eternal difference in the people and communities in which you serve. It is enough, because Jesus is enough wherever you serve his bride.

Schools and seminaries, please reach out and help your smaller, rural churches. Invite those pastors into your classrooms, be a resource for them as they search for pastors, and celebrate your alumni who stay and faithfully serve churches no one ever will hear about this side of eternity.

Pastors and staff of rural churches, I know it is hard. I know it can be discouraging and lonely. I know you often feel like no one else cares, but please know there are many of us who love you and are praying and cheering for you. Your faithfulness matters. Your presence in your community matters. Your church matters. You matter. You are not alone.

We need rural churches, and we need men and women willing to serve rural churches. If you are a part of a rural church, please encourage and support your pastor. If you are serving a rural church, please keep going; we need your faithfulness.

We all can do better by not focusing simply on the bigger and brighter churches.

We all can do our part to help the rural church not only survive, but thrive in the future.

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