

Voices: This is the small, rural church's moment

May 4, 2022

It is easy to be discouraged about the current trajectory of the church in America. If we look at social media alone, we seem to be more divided, angrier and more out of touch with the world around us.

Every week, we get a new article showing us the declining numbers of attendance, Bible reading and belief in traditional Christian doctrines. When we add the pandemic and polarization of the last few years, it can be easy to lose hope and feel impending doom.

This is nothing new for small and rural churches. These churches and those who lead them have been told for decades their churches are failing and their communities are diminishing.

In fact, in my December 2021 Voices article, "[The future of the rural church](#)," you probably could sense my own discouragement. If I am honest, there are times I swing between discouragement and hope. In many ways, I bought into this narrative. As I have continued to think about the future of the rural church, however, I now am in a season of hope.

One of the emerging trends in the last few years is a resurgence of many smaller and rural communities. This cultural moment presents an amazing opportunity for small, rural churches.

This is a moment of great hope. You can call me delusional, but I am optimistic about the future of the church in rural America.

When you look at the data, there actually has been [a reverse](#) of the rural migration in the last few years. The numbers of those leaving rural areas

has decreased, and the number of those moving into rural areas has risen.

COVID-19, the rise of remote work, the cost of living in urban areas, and the desire to be outside of crowded areas all have led to this change.

A place to belong

Throughout the pandemic we also have seen the deep loneliness much of our country experiences become undeniable.

The small to mid-size church has an amazing opportunity to step into the loneliness, despair and division of this cultural moment. One of the greatest strengths of a small church is the sense of community and closeness within it.

In the loneliness of our age, the small, rural church can offer the good news of belonging to the body of Christ. Instead of trying to be like the big church in the next town, small, rural churches ought to play to this strength.

Large churches are seeking ways to build community. Books and conferences teach how to build meaningful community in a large church. One primary way is to get their members into small groups.

We need close community. We are designed to live life together. Our small to mid-size churches can offer community, friendship and belonging naturally.

People are looking for a place to belong. They are moving from urban areas because they are tired of not being seen and known. Small churches can stand in the gap of loneliness and offer a place of belonging in the family of God.

I will never forget the love of First Baptist Church in Gustine. When my

mom passed away in 2013, I had been their pastor four years. The funeral was a five-hour drive from Gustine, but as I walked into the church for the funeral, I could see numerous people who made the drive. The way they loved me in that moment told me: I was family; I belonged. This is the power of a small, united, loving church.

A challenge to small, rural churches

Being a small church is not something to be cured of, but is a calling to be lived into faithfully.

As many are looking to get back out into the world and find community, small churches have a great opportunity to be the place of belonging people need and are looking for.

Despite hearing about the decline of the rural church, this is a moment when people are coming to us, and we can make a huge impact. This is the small church moment. This is a chance for our rural churches to see the work of God in a powerful way.

Are we ready to be faithful in this moment? Are we ready to be the place of belonging so many are longing for? Are we ready to reach out to our new neighbors? Or are we suspicious of them or resentful of their presence in our small, quiet rural communities?

God loves the rural church and the small church. We may be used to hearing how bad the future looks for the small, rural church, but this is a moment of great hope and opportunity. Are you ready to step into this moment?

Zac Harrel is the network missionary for the Heart of Texas Baptist Network in Early. The views expressed are those of the author.