



Ministry In Rural and Small Town Settings

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“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”
1 Corinthians 3:6

In many rural and small-town settings, in lower population areas, the way we are forming pastors has been changing. Regional church bodies and congregations are rediscovering old and finding new ways forward. The future likely will bring even more movement towards alternate paths of forming leaders and stewarding the Gospel.

FAITHFUL AND FRUITFUL

God continues in many ways to grow gracious, faithful, and fruitful Christ followers in small towns and rural communities and beyond. This article will explore leadership for the future church in

Changes in the context for rural ministry mean the development of alternate forms of training and equipping leaders for congregations. Besides providing leaders, these new forms are models for how all Christians might be formed for service and leadership in congregations and in the world.

general, and focus on rural and small-town ministry leadership in particular. Faithful and fruitful leadership in God's Church is always anchored in the teaching, cross, and resurrection of Jesus. God's Church serves in our swiftly changing context gathered around the cross, to hear the Gospel proclaimed, and be sent to serve the Gospel in everyday life.

Faithful leadership follows Christ Jesus. Leadership for communities of faith begins with listening deeply to Jesus the Word, and the world. It serves God's longings for all people and all creation. Fruitful leadership metrics are driven by the Spirit to be more than the numbers we easily can focus on like worship attendance, participants in programs, or financial support. The body of Christ, the local community of faith, announces God's work of transforming grace in people's and in community's lives. God's Spirit provokes changes in different dimensions of our life. Christian leadership proclaims God's gracious love that we know most deeply through the life, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN MINISTRY AND MISSION: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Rural and small-town ministry varies in a number of ways, including:

- the way the land is shaped
- by the economics of the area (for example, agriculture, fishing, ranching, mining, forestry, light manufacturing, and recreation)
- by the demographics of a region (including the proximity to regional centers, large towns, and cities) Living in a town of 1000–5000, is different than living in small towns of 300–500, or in an area with where there are fewer than seven people per square mile, just to name a few examples)
- by the distinctive cultures of that region.

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Faith communities in small town and rural contexts are influenced, challenged, and supported by the other Christian denominations, people of other faiths in their area, and by the people who are not connected to any faith tradition who are neighbors. People who come from a particular area know things about their missional context that would take a long time to learn through books or classes. Local context matters.

Rural congregations are both similar and different from congregations located in suburbs or urban areas. “If you’ve seen one rural county, you’ve seen one rural county,” rural development experts like to say, according to Allen Stanton.¹ Rural and small-town ministries are distinctive and differ because of the places and people who live there. The more I learn from reading, videos, and most importantly students spread across the country, the more I grow cautious about using sharp distinctions to talk about rural and small town folks. There are many kinds of rural contexts, congregations, and faith leaders serving them. Success looks different in small town and rural contexts. A congregation that is stable in size and resources, while the community they are placed in has declined ten percent over a decade, has done amazing ministry and work in a challenging mission context.

As I drove across the prairies of Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota in recent weeks on two longer road trips I noticed how the contexts were both simultaneously different and how much they have in common. I looked out the window and wondered, “What are you up to, God, in this area, these neighborhoods, and among these people?”

I am intrigued at how often people report to me, because of my position, the beauty of rural people, and the joy of ministry in a smaller town, or wide open rural context. I am also surprised regularly as people want to talk about how “conservative,” or “racist,” or

¹ Allen Stanton has also published a helpful book, *Reclaiming Rural : Building Thriving Rural Congregations* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

“backward” they believe rural and small town people can be. People that fit those categories can be found in communities of any size.

We are called to love all our neighbors. Curiosity about places and people we do not understand will better serve God’s Church, and world, as we follow Jesus and lead in God’s future Church. In biblical stories, God often works through people from small towns and the country. God’s guidance and work in small town and rural congregations and contexts still enhances God’s whole Church. When trust is high in smaller faith communities it is amazing how fast congregations can move.

I have serious concerns about the current tendency to oversimplify and oversell “the rural urban divide.” There are differences. Differences can be significant, helpful, puzzling, or harmful. There are also more rural, urban, and suburban interdependencies than we might imagine or remember in the current media and political times.² We need to challenge the notion of this “great” divide. Differences are not always bad but can also be a gift. Fruitful leadership looks below the shorthand, simplistic categories political and media leaders use to explain a complex, beautiful, and broken world.

Rural and small-town ministry contexts continue to be important mission fields in our time, just as suburbs and urban centers are. While the overall population of rural people grows smaller in many places, it is growing in many others. Rural congregations and people make up a significant part of our country’s population and God’s church. Like other places in our time, rural areas generally have growing percentages of people who are disconnected from a community of faith, any faith tradition, and the story of Jesus. We can learn from one another about how to increase the odds our ministries of love that center on Jesus are flourishing.

LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUTION ISSUE?

As I visit with people from across the church in various denominations, I am struck by how often people in small town and rural congregations are currently moving forward without a pastor formed in

² Ellen Wolter, “How to shift rural-urban discussion toward an appreciation for interdependence,” UMN Extension, November 10, 2022. <https://extension.umn.edu/community-news-and-insights/how-shift-rural-urban-discussion-toward-appreciation-interdependence>

the way I experienced (with a Masters of Divinity and a full year of internship). Distributed learning online has also been a part of increasing numbers of pastors', ministers' and deacons' formation. There are many challenges, and an even greater opportunity to develop more fully the ministry of the whole community—the body of Christ. God's rural church experiments, iterates, learns to improve the outcomes of formation to lead Christian communities.

We need to continue to imagine and adjust ways to form ministers in our context. The future formation of the baptized, leaders, deacons, ministers, and pastors can lead to an enhanced ministry and mission, even if our Masters of Divinity-trained ordained pastors are fewer. Our global companion congregations in Africa often are showing growth, in many ways, in their congregations using catechists, self-supporting pastors, and multi-vocational ministers, for example. The new tools of online education and varieties of paths of formation increase opportunities. These new models need to be understood and accepted by the congregations and the multiple generations of God's people they seek to serve.

For years there has been talk about a clergy shortage. I used to reframe this as a clergy distribution problem, since twenty years ago there were plenty of pastors, deacons, and ministers who sought to serve in metro areas but often were not open to rural congregations and ministry. In the current environment, the challenges grow broader and more pronounced. Now it is more than small towns, but also rural regional centers that are having challenges attracting pastors.

Our formation pathways are changing. We have decreasing numbers of people seeking a Masters of Divinity degree across most traditions.³ The number of people studying for Masters of Arts, as well as exploring alternative ways like certificates, or retreat formation models are moving up modestly. Retiring baby boomers' absence means reduced numbers of available pastors. We also see decreasing full time call positions. Seminary, regional church leaders, and congregations all are working to adjust, to the reduced numbers of people available to serve. They are encouraging new partnerships, new ministry staff models, new funding models, and forming new leaders who care for

³ Chris Meinzer, "Bright spots emerge in fall 2023 ATS enrollment update," Association of Theological Schools, 2023. <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/bright-spots-emerge-in-fall-2023-ats-enrollment-update.pdf>

fewer dimensions of the congregation's life in a focused part-time way like preaching, or visitation, in addition to youth and children, youth and family. In addition to more multipoint parishes, we were seeing more asymmetrical partnerships where larger congregations partner with smaller congregations fruitfully in Southwestern Minnesota.

I know we have to open our imaginations and notice how God's Spirit is forming leaders. For example, remember households where parents share and live their faith. Notice the small groups where people share their lives, learn, serve together, love their neighbors, and minister to one another.

FORMATION IMAGINATION ISSUE?

As I grew older, it became more and more clear to me that leadership in God's church is about more than pastors, ministers, and deacons. I know we have to open our imaginations and notice how God's Spirit is forming leaders. For example, remember households where parents share and live their faith. Notice the small groups where people share their lives, learn, serve together, love their neighbors, and minister to one another. More recently, through "fresh expressions" experiments, God is calling people to gather, share the story of Jesus, pray for one another, praise God together and grow as gracious disciples who grow more Christ followers.⁴

In the beginning of my service as bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in Southwestern Minnesota I did not imagine how swiftly online distance learning, apprenticeship models, certificate programs, and retreat models of intensive learning would effectively create new pathways. They are used to grow baptized people as disciples, into congregational leaders and to serve as public stewards of the Gospel.

⁴ Michael Adam Beck and Tyler Kleeberger, *Fresh Expressions of the Rural Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022).

Through the eighteen years I served as a synodical (regional) bishop in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, I watched multiple forces in the broader culture and inside our way of doing church made it more challenging to attract and retain pastors for rural contexts. In my lifetime, we shifted from a time there were so many rural candidates that rural congregations provided pastors for city congregations, to a time where we worked hard and creative to encourage metro candidates for ministry to consider serving in rural contexts, to where we are seeking to grow ministers and pastors from small towns and rural contexts because urban and suburban people have a hard time imagining serving in rural communities. Now, we are also struggling to form enough pastors and deacons for larger congregations and communities in rural areas. I lament this swift change and all the losses within it. I also see opportunities for seminaries, regional church bodies, and congregations to work together to better serve God's people.

As I look back, I wonder if the problem was a formation imagination issue.⁵ Our modern paradigms around leadership formation assumed more education would create greater effectiveness. I wished we had been studying the pastors who were most effective at forming baptized people as leaders and ministers in their everyday life. I wish we had watched and learned more from pastors and congregations who found ways to form teams of lay leaders to carry the ministry of local congregations or parishes. We were keeping our eyes on congregations that brought forth more ministerial candidates. Congregations and regional church leaders focused on their pastor(s)... and for larger congregations also paid staff. When pastors left it was almost like congregations imagined that they just needed to order another one from the seminary or another congregation, like you would order a new motor to replace the one that quit working. People were hunting for the pastor who would solve their challenges and restore the congregation to its glory days. What if instead of focusing on clergy, we focused on the most powerful expression of God's church, all the baptized people sent into daily callings? What if we reimagined our congregational/parish life from a program and staff system to a system

⁵ Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015). This is one of the first books that made me start to wonder about our need for a shift to more pathways of forming people to serve in ministry. Another much earlier work was Wesley Frensdorff, *Total Ministry* (Reno: Episcopal Church, Diocese of Nevada, 1980).

that focuses more of our energy into the formation of all the baptized deeper in the faith, built up their ministry skills, and built teams of ministers? What if we trained our pastors to be player coaches, not ministry specialists who alone do the ministry and serve the Gospel, in our congregational life?

Many rural and small-town congregations are having a hard time. Population is declining and aging in many rural counties. Pastors have been damaged by the Covid-19 disputes and political polarization. Yet, there are signs God is up to something as more local leadership hears God's call to be theologically trained, equipped for ministry, and to serve in small town and rural mission settings in traditional and new ways. I am confident God will continue to find new and rediscover old ways to grow leaders for rural communities and congregation's ministry. God will guide us as we figure out how to deepen people's spiritual lives and widen their theological awareness.

Equipping God's people who work and live with people who are spiritually hungry, will multiply discipling leaders for ministry in everyday locations and in the life of their faith community.

BROADEN YOUR DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION AND LEADERSHIP LOCATIONS

In the future, in rural and small-town contexts (and others) we will have more and more people coming into our ministry or missional contexts who know little to nothing about the faith. How do we best serve the Gospel in this deepening reality of secularism? If we just grow a few deep leaders and have them do the ministry, it might be more comfortable. Equipping God's people who work and live with people who are spiritually hungry, will multiply discipling leaders for ministry in everyday locations and in the life of their faith community.

In the future, pastors, deacons, and experienced ministers need to imagine themselves to be more like the basketball team point guard,

distributing the ball and developing the team rather than doing all the ministry. They will be called to encourage even more leadership from the differently gifted baptized people around them. They will need to develop their skills at noticing and identifying people with ministry gifts for inside and beyond the local congregation. Success looks a little different in the rule of God. The clergy centered model of the past worked well in the previous associational culture, but in the current culture of authenticity we will need to make significant changes.⁶ There will be growing pains. We will have to be curious, experiment, learn and then try faithful innovations to better love our neighbors and serve the community of Jesus. We will make good mistakes as we act, learn in the process and then share with one another.

Instead of waiting for other congregations to grow ministers and pastors, every congregation should have an apprenticeship process for a variety of ministers. Even if you are small, growing a couple of apprentice lay preachers will be important. It is especially important for rural communities of faith's ongoing ministry. Some will go on to become ministers and pastors as they journey deeper in life. Growing people to apprentice as worship leaders, congregational care visitors, faith formation leaders, administrators, catalysts, people to take care of financial life, and more will be important. I am talking about formation work that is done over greater time and in deeper relational ways. You could start early with confirmands who could be encouraged to apprentice in different roles in the congregation to see if they would be interested in serving that way or others in the future.

BACK TO THE SOURCES

All the baptized can be encouraged to practice the faith by praying daily, reading scripture, Bible studies, podcasts, blogs or books, inviting people to join in serving the neighbor in need who you see in your contexts and beyond, and inviting people to join in community at worship or fellowship events/groups. We will find our way forward growing generosity, sharing resources and time. There are older and

⁶ Dwight Zscheile, "From the Age of Association to Authenticity It's not just you," Faith+Lead, August 11, 2021. <https://faithlead.org/blog/from-the-age-of-association-to-authenticity/#:~:text=The%20Age%20of%20Association%20paradigm,and%20%20expressing%20%20one's%20true%20%20self.>

newer movements to grow people deeper as apprentices of Jesus or disciples like “The Way of Love” from the Episcopal Church.⁷

As we look to grow and sustain leaders for the future of God’s world and God’s Church, returning to the sources served the reformation era. It would also serve us personally and communally. In the past few months, I have spent time living with the Psalms. They reminded me of the ways that I can domesticate God and God’s longings for this world. Whatever your tradition, you could do similar things with scripture and also key writings of teachers, like Martin Luther.

IDENTIFYING, DEVELOPING AND ENCOURAGING LEADERS

Congregations small and large need to be praying about, discerning, and identifying people to invite to serve in leadership roles. We need to grow apprentices for the crucial roles of congregational chair, lay preacher, congregational care visitor, and worship leaders in addition to faith formation, music and governance teams. This process can be formal or informal. In my experience, if the congregation is smaller, it may be that it is more informal; whereas larger congregations will be more formal. To move these faithful innovations, you will need to develop allies. There are people who are trusted, can make things happen, know how to network, and test your ideas because they know the congregation and community so deeply.

EQUIPMENT ROOM

Before coming to Luther Seminary, I had a sign on the door of my office. It said, “The Equipment Room,” to remind me that I was called to equip all the baptized and all who come in to better follow and serve Jesus in God’s world. Leaders for the future church will want to put this calling on the top of their job description. A faithful and fruitful pastor/minister/leader equips and steadily develops people’s gifts, ministerial confidence and spiritual depth as ministers of the Gospel in God’s church and in God’s world. Through this, God’s people are sent into God’s world to live out their ministry. ☩

⁷ “Getting Started with the Way of Love,” *The Episcopal Church*, undated, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/getting-started/>.

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