

Rural Ministry Revitalization Project Report

Rev. Phyl Putz, Northern Plains Regional Minister, NAB

2/20/08

Purpose:

The purpose of the Rural Ministry Revitalization project is to create a strategy for our rural churches to more effectively make disciples of Jesus Christ. Rural churches in the Northern Plains Region are experiencing a decline in numbers. The conversion rate is low, between 2 and 3% of worship attendance average per year. Most rural churches have not changed their ministry approach to meet community changes in any substantial way, nor have church leaders embraced a vision or provided resources to do so. The result is that most congregations hold little hope of reaching unbelievers for Christ.

While these observations carry a discouraging tone, it must be said that the conditions I've described are reversible. There are many people in most rural communities who have not yet made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. While most rural residents have some connection to a church, a relatively high percentage (up to 50% in some communities), are not actively involved.

Objectives Addressed:

I studied the issues involved in making disciples in rural areas by reading, interviewing rural pastors in clusters meetings and separately, then accessing information from experts. One very revealing discovery is that most rural ministry experts and organizations focus almost entirely on the maintenance and revitalization of traditional approaches. For example, the Rural Home Missionary Association under the direction of Ron Klaasen is committed to supporting pastors in traditional stand-alone churches, while recruiting and placing trained pastors in rural churches. In other words, rural leaders have been largely limited in their thinking by the conditions that exist, the approaches now in place, the vision of present rural leaders and the values of rural congregations.

After reading much of the literature and perusing as many rural ministry websites as I could find, it has become evident that little has been written to address root issues involving the failure of rural churches to thrive. This study has revealed an ambivalence regarding the possibility for the deep change necessary for revitalization. The assumption appears to be that adjustments need to be made, but must be made within the wineskin of existing structures. By structure, I mean everything that is structured including the building, grounds, worship service, Sunday School, other programs, organization as well as both the formal and informal decision making process as it relates to power centers.

Accompanying the need to evaluate the potential of structural changes is the equally important issue of relationships. My original assumption has been confirmed that, while rural residents find ways to live together in communities, there are significant barriers that often keep relationships from developing in healthy ways both inside and outside of the church. I have often called these relationship barriers "glass walls." In general, people in rural communities do relate to one another, but often in superficial and guarded ways. Unresolved conflicts in competitive arenas like business, school and agriculture take on a life

of their own, some lasting for generations. And, they keep people from feeling safe enough to be transparent with each other.

Whole churches sometimes become known by the conflicted history of a few of their members. Sides are also quietly drawn between churches. Movement of members from one church to another is extremely visible and can upset the community status quo. When churches decline and merger becomes an option this kind of history can be debilitating. Even though sharing a pastor or merger may become a reality, conflicted members often either cease participation entirely, attend church in another locality or become marginal in church involvement. Any combination of these choices will diminish the benefit of the new arrangement. While the picture may seem dismal, two hopeful issues emerge: urgency and calling.

Urgency

Urgency exists not only with regard to the church, but because of the church's diminished capacity, even more so in the community. In the midst of a declining rural population, live lost and hurting people. The plains and prairies have high rates of binge drinking, drug production and addiction as well as depression, obesity and accompanying health issues. Isolation, distance and lack of opportunity are contributing factors.

While most people have at the very least a generational attachment to a church or religion, participation in local churches is generally low. In the Dakotas, Montana and Manitoba, most prevalent church affiliations are with mainline denominations where the Gospel has typically not been clearly proclaimed. Because of a lack of intense re-evaluation of our ministries, we are slowly losing our rural churches and in the process, losing the lost.

In this paragraph, I will depart from normal sentence structure and use only numerical indications of the status of this region's churches. In 2009, of the 52 churches in the Northern Plains Region, 4 (3 in the NCA and 1 in the MBA) hire pulpit supply only. 6 (5 in the NCA and 1 in the MB) have bi-vocational or part time pastors. Of the remaining 42 churches, 6 (5 in the NCA and 1 in the MBA) have what could be considered a marginal ability to continue with a full time pastor and stand-alone church building. I have identified those churches on the basis at least two of the following three things: average worship attendance, total budget and results of the leadership survey. At the beginning of 2008, there were fifty-three churches regionally. One, the Berlin Baptist Church, Fredonia, ND closed at the end of September. Given an accurate assessment, this leaves 36 churches in the two associations (22 in the NCA and 14 in the MBA) that have long-term viability as a stand-alone church with a full time pastor. This means that with present trends 17 communities either have experienced or stand to experience the loss of a significant evangelical witness.

Sadly, across denominational lines, many leaders see their involvement with rural ministries as a low, but necessary priority. There is the sense that their role is to help rural churches continue what they are doing as best they can until the inevitable happens and they can no longer do it. At that point, other traditional remedies are suggested including the sharing of pastors, mergers or closure of churches. While such approaches can be helpful and should not be entirely discarded, it should be noted that they are predominantly focused on maintenance. A driving motive for this study is that I do not share that perspective.

Opportunity

I have always seen the rural community as a goldmine of opportunity to find innovative ways to make help people become Christ-followers. It is possible for rural ministries to reach a percentage of population impossible in more populated communities. However, woven into the fabric of most rural cultures is a high value of the status quo. If there is to be a turn-around in our rural ministries, we must address this value in productive ways. We must start with the Gospels where Jesus did his powerful work among people who were not inclined to change.

As I read the life and ministry of Jesus, it does not appear that He was very interested at all in the status quo. In fact, while He understood and giving existing structures their due, He gave them little or no support. He honored them, but He boldly criticized those who unduly valued them. Careful attention to His teaching, what He modeled and the movement He began quickly reveals that He intended to build a movement that could easily be identified like this:

- communities of believers who loved God with every fiber of their being...
- made up of people who loved those who needed help at a level equal to their self love ...
- clearly sold out both corporately and individually to help others become Jesus followers.

Everything else was subservient to those priorities. Their love for God was expressed in worship together and alone, as well as through lives adjusted to godly standards of morality and ethics. Their love for others found its expression in the social and spiritual care of all kinds of people - ethnic connections, social status and spiritual conditions aside. They utilized every opportunity to help anyone and everyone meet the living Christ and did so in the natural course of their everyday lives.

What they rightfully called tradition was the teaching of the apostles. It was comprised of inspired truth and essential ministry. Organizational and ministry structures served those priorities which yielded mission-critical activities. (Allowing church structures including buildings, organization, programming or scheduling to dictate priorities would have been and still is self-defeating) As a result, although churches looked quite different from one another, they remained under the authority of the apostles who continually pointed them back to the essentials when they got off track. This illuminates something that will eventually challenge us all. Since Baptists are committed to congregational church government, we may have lost our appreciation for the spiritual authority that God vests in leaders. This demands further examination, but not in this paper.

Where we live, we find that our churches have not changed much in well over a hundred years. How, in a church culture that does not know how to change can we join God in a turn-around movement? How can we lead this kind of church to become a productive disciple-making organism? Is it possible for congregations that value what has always been, might once again proclaim the Gospel in such a way that it will turn OUR world upside? Could we become known once again as a movement that actually acts like it cares deeply

about lost people? I believe that this is what God desires, so I believe that it is possible. We only need to figure out how to join Him in what He wants to do. How might that happen?

Here is what I have learned:

- Nearly all of our rural churches have one or more members or participants (I call them Super Stars) who intuitively understand Christ's priorities and are gifted, motivated and willing to launch into innovative ministry. These believers have an adequate knowledge of Scripture, maintain a consistent devotional life, are committed to the success of their local church and are often involved in ministry outside of the local church.
- Rural cultures generally foster a strong, quiet resistance to people and activities that are different from those to which they are accustomed.
- Most rural pastors naturally tend to conform to the local church culture making it difficult for them to lead change. This is understandable since there are many examples of innovative pastors who have not survived in the rural context. However, it is helpful to observe that from its inception, Christianity is counter-cultural.
- Leading change demands the risks inherent in "seed-dying-in-the-ground" commitment. It is possible that the changes necessary to effectively reach our rural communities with the Gospel could cause pastors to become vulnerable to the loss of their positions, income as it now exists and strained relationships. The church could even cease to exist in its present form. Such threats can be viewed as dangerous or a very fine adventure, depending on the individual's perspective.
- To be successful new approaches must be simple, practical and reproducible. The making of disciples requires life-on-life demonstrations of God's power accompanied by sound teaching. In the rural context, networks of relationships must necessarily be adjusted in order for Christians to engage in such activities.

A deeper examination of these truths reveals important clues about our future direction.

Super Stars

Nearly all of our rural churches have one or more members or participants (super stars) who intuitively understand Christ's priorities and are gifted, motivated and willing to launch into innovative ministry.

Simply stated, nearly every pastor or leadership team I surveyed indicated that their church has one or more key individuals or families who are committed to productive ministry. Some are deeply involved in the ministry of their church. The pastor and congregation depend on them to perform multiple functions. A typical example is that of a person who teaches a Sunday School class, leads in worship services, oversees the youth ministry and serves on the church board. Others are not as involved in the local church, but are heavily committed to other ministry projects. From local Christian organizations to regional and national groups like the Gideons or Steer, Inc., folks like this are often absent from their church and may appear not to be vitally involved.

Several themes are common to both types. They are typically very busy, experiencing stress and fatigue, the first group, from so many responsibilities and the second group because of the need to focus on multiple organizations and excessive travel. As a whole, they are generally discouraged about their church, and frequently travel to other churches or Christian events to receive encouragement. When questioned deeply, they carry a deep passion for lost people, but feel blocked from effectively reaching them. They are looking for a cause.

Counter Culture

Rural cultures generally foster a strong, quiet resistance to people and activities that are “different”.

While similar resistance can be found in urban communities, the stakes are not generally as high. Larger population centers allow church leaders to move forward when a few of their members are not on board simply because those people can be replaced.

Anyone who is committed to lead change inevitably leads counter-cultural activities. Such activities could actually involve confronting the culture of their church. This will inevitably lead to tension and some level of conflict. But there are other ways to be counter-cultural. For instance, one might step outside to make disciples of Christ while remaining a part of the local church. This will require the blessing of church leaders and a release from conflicting church activities.

Make no mistake about it. Any move to do things differently inside or outside of the church will probably invite criticism or worse. Any leader who is willing to follow Jesus in this way should expect push-back from the traditionalists in the church.

Conformity

Most rural pastors naturally tend to conform to the local church culture making it difficult for them to lead change.

At first glance, this statement may seem critical. Though we all fail in many ways, this is actually meant as encouragement and affirmation. As I travel among our rural churches, an ever-growing admiration develops for you pastors who serve them. You work hard, sometimes moonlighting to make ends meet. Opportunities for your families are often limited by finances and distance. Distance is an ever-present challenge, whether it involves clusters, association meetings, athletic events, shopping or hospital visitation.

To add to the challenge, most books and other resources are created by people to whom small towns are those of less than 50,000. Even rural experts, when they finally get a book published, often re-locate their offices to larger cities. Ministry method and success is usually measured against larger (or even mega) churches. Conference speakers are usually those who've made it “big”.

But you've done some things right, and you are being used by God in helping people conform to Christ. In important ways, you have followed the example of the Apostle Paul who constantly tried to become all things to all people so that by all means he might win some. If you had begun as an aggressive innovator your church may not have extended a call in the first place. Understanding the rural culture has given you the ability to function within it. The question still remains. How can the pastor help a rural church effectively reach their community with the Gospel?

Conclusion of Research

Once I had absorbed what I heard from rural pastors, I created and administered a more focused questionnaire for lay church leaders to determine specific possibilities. After assessing the responses and reviewing previous research, I have proposed three possible strategies. This is where your involvement as a rural pastor becomes one of the most important parts of this process. **I need your response to my suggestions.**

Product of the Study

Once I have listened to you, I will adjust the strategies accordingly, create a description for each of them and prepared a workshop for each in order to lead church leaders through a process of revitalization.

Part of that process may involve the Natural Church Development survey. My goal is that in five years I will have helped ten rural churches directly, and influenced ten more by linking them with pastors and leadership groups who had been through the process. I envision that at the end of five years, the twenty churches who go through the process will have achieved an average Natural Church Development survey score of 55.

I envision that these churches will experience a ten percent growth through conversions and that their church budget will increase accordingly. Consortiums of rural churches joined in common projects including ministries for children & youth, home church movements in remote locations, leadership development initiatives, Native American Ministries and other projects will be formed as God leads.

Now, it's Your Turn!

What follows are three strategies that focus on an enlarged vision to make disciples of Jesus Christ. When you have read these introductory pages and studied the suggested strategies, I ask you to do the following:

1. Discuss them with other pastors in your cluster or another pastors group, taking notes to be passed on to me.
2. Complete the survey by following instructions in the email cover letter. Make other suggestions in the survey form.

When I have heard from you, I will re-evaluate my conclusions and prepare a workshop that to be presented to your church leaders for their consideration. I am hoping that the workshop will spawn discussions among your leaders and enhance ministry effectiveness.

Appendix 1 - A Statement of the Challenge

The Problem:

- Churches in rural communities are generally declining in numbers and conversion growth, reflecting the changing rural environment. Most such churches have not been able to adjust ministry approaches in order to reach the present population with the Gospel.

The Solution:

- We must develop ministry approaches that will cross rural economic, religious and ethnic lines that presently serve as barriers to the Gospel

The Rationale

- The Great Commandment and the Great Commission
- There are many lost people in rural communities
 - The Plains and Prairies have high rates of binge drinking, drug production, depression and obesity
 - While most people have at least a generational attachment to a church or religion, participation in local churches is generally low
 - The most prevalent church attachments are with mainline denominations, where the Gospel has not been clearly proclaimed
 - Our rural churches have a very low conversion growth rate (around 3% of average Sunday morning attendance per year).
- Without a drastic trend change, many of our churches will become smaller, unable to support a local pastor and eventually cease to exist.

The Urgency

- Of 34 churches in the NCA, 8 churches no longer support a full time pastor. Of those, two churches share a pastor, one has a part time tent-making pastor and five have pastors who drive in for pulpit supply. Two of those five churches are having conversations about closing.
- Of the remaining 26 churches, 6 have informally indicated that they do not know how long they can continue with their present arrangement of a full time pastor and permanent facility.
- The potential loss of 14 churches in the next 10 years leaves the region with a great area with no or a greatly reduced Gospel witness.
- The opportunity to turn this trend around is limited because of the declining ability of the region to support a Regional Minister. Without centralized guidance, churches in their present state are not likely to facilitate effective change.
- The dynamic history of those declining churches indicates a strong heritage of in which the early churches won many to Christ and helped them grow to maturity. Churches whose leaders are asking good questions and seeking direction for outreach are seeing results. More churches must take this course of action if we are to see the tide turned.

Appendix 2 – Three Strategies for Rural Ministry Change

ALTERNATIVES FOR RURAL MINISTRY

Change the Way You Do Church

Description:

Typically, rural congregations respond very differently when in their church building than they do anywhere else in the community. Here are some ideas currently being used in rural areas, not in any order of preference:

- Separate the worship portion of the service from the teaching time with a 20 minute fellowship segment including coffee, juice & goodies.
- Periodically conduct a Sunday morning worship service in another facility, thereby breaking down the barriers inherent in the “Baptist Church building”.
- Introduce a style of worship music that fits with what people in the community are listening to during the week.
- Develop a small group system that replaces one major program. For example, small groups could replace adult Sunday School, thereby freeing adults to work in that ministry.
- When major events occur on Sundays in the community, worship on Saturday evening and find a way to serve people during the event on Sunday (parking, clean-up, free water, free food, etc).

DVD Messages with Pastoral Care Option

Description:

Modeled regionally by Pastor Bruce Dick, Bethel Evangelical Free Church, Devils Lake, ND, this approach uses a combination of sermons on DVD, local lay worship leaders and a Pastor of Rural Church Care who provides leadership and resources for more than one church in the system. The cost of DVDs is negligible. The churches in the system share the cost of the Rural Church Care Pastor. The Rural Pastor or the preaching pastor is available for significant issues and events such as baptisms, marriages, funerals or important organizational decisions.

History: Bethel is connected with three churches in this way, one for more than a year.

Advantages:

- The local church is able to continue a ministry similar to that which they are accustomed.
- The cost of this arrangement is significantly less than supporting a full-time pastor
- The preaching can be of a higher quality than when using other alternatives, such as random pulpit supply.
- The same pastor or pastoral team preaches most Sundays.
- Pastoral care is consistently available

Logistics and Concerns:

- The sponsoring church needs to be within a specified distance from the churches it serves.
- Local lay leadership needs to be willing to undergo training to lead in ways to which they may not have been accustomed in the past.
- The local church needs to make a certain commitment to join in financing the project.
- A video projector with a screen is the best alternative for the preaching time. Quality equipment is a necessity. Room darkening may be needed.

Alternate/Additional Ideas:

- Utilize this technology when two or more churches share a pastor who is physically present at each church on a rotating basis.
- Develop house groups for those who live a great distance from the church building. The groups can use the sermon DVDs for their teaching time, coupled with a discussion format.

Documents:

- *DVD Plus Direct Care Option Proposal* - Bethel Evangelical Free Church, Devils Lake, ND, Rev. Bruce Dick, Pastor
- *DVD Plus Direct Care Option Pastor of Rural Church Care Job Description* - Bethel Evangelical Free Church, Devils Lake, ND, Rev. Bruce Dick, Pastor

House Church

Description:

House churches are springing up all over North America. In reality, this form of church is its most basic, and can rightfully be traced back to the original church in Jerusalem following the Pentecost. In order for house churches to operate in a biblical and orderly way, they should be part of a network overseen by a person with pastoral gifts, well developed skills and good training whether formal or not.

The most important question:

- If nothing stood in my way, what would I like to accomplish in this community for the cause of Christ?

The most important principle:

- Once a house church is established by committed, prepared leaders, they must resist incorporating believers who are presently part of a church. The exception is that of those who desire to become part of a multiplication movement, submit to training and are fully committed to reaching lost people. It may be that if a house church exists next to a free-standing church, people who are believers be denied participation. This, then, keeps them from appear to be stealing sheep. Also, multiplication of these groups will occur with leaders who intuitively understand what they are about.

Some further, must-ask questions regarding this type of ministry are:

- Is our form of ministry no longer functioning in a way that adequately fulfills the purpose for which Christ established this church?
- Can we identify a group or some groups of people in our community who are not yet believers and are not being reached effectively by any evangelical ministry including ours?
- Does continuing in a stand-alone building-centered church ministry demonstrate good stewardship of our resources?
- Am I, as a pastor, willing to adjust my ministry approach?
- Is the congregation willing to adjust to a less formal home-based ministry platform?

If the congregation is not open to adjust to a home-based ministry, other questions must be answered:

- In what ways can we continue to minister to the present congregation while effectively reaching lost people?
- Who, your congregation, intuitively understands the concept of organic ministry development AND is open to launch such a ministry outside the walls and programming of the church?
- How can we lead the congregation to releasing and blessing such individuals to establish a ministry in lost people's lives?
- How can we support such a ministry without maintaining official, visible connections to our church?

If the congregation is not open to releasing and blessing members who wish to reach outside of the church building and programming, further questions may need to be answered:

- What group (age, ethnic, economic, religious background, need, etc) is not presently being reached with the Gospel, and what kind of approach might create an opportunity to do so?
- What teaching, training or leadership development is needed to reach that group?
- What resources (people, our building, other material possessions, finances) do we now have that could be channeled toward this ministry?

- In what ways do we need outside resourcing to accomplish this ministry?
- What needs exist in the community that making our church facility available could supply?
- What cooperative ministries are possible which would enable us to join other community churches in those efforts?

House Church Web Sites (Note that we do not agree with all that is posted on these sites. They do, however, provide an overview of the good and bad of the house church movement):

[House Church Wikipedia site](#)
[House Church Central](#)
[House Church Network](#)
[House2House](#)
[Present Testimony Ministry \(Frank Viola\)](#)

Key Books for Basic Ministry Development:

Books by Johnson & Perkinson (PRAXIS) –

[A New Testament Trilogy](#)
[The Kingdom Quest](#)
[Free materials from PRAXIS](#)

Books by Neil Cole, Organic/Simple Church/House Church expert -

[Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens](#) by Neil Cole
[Organic Leadership: Leading Naturally Right Where You Are](#) by Neil Cole
[Search & Rescue: Becoming a Disciple Who Makes a Difference](#) by Neil

Cole

[Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups](#) by Neil Cole

Sharing a Pastor

Description:

Sharing a pastor, traditionally known as having a “yoked” parish, is one option for churches no longer able to support a full time pastor. Mainline churches have been following this option for many years. Some have embraced ordination for both men and women, and hire a married couple as a pastoral team. Typically, such teams serve from three to five churches, given that their proximity allows each of them to get to two to three churches on a Sunday morning. Obvious advantages include having a full-time pastor and being able to share the costs. However, if distances are great, travel costs may increase greatly, and some of the churches may find themselves distanced from a pastor who lives in another community.

There are examples of groups of churches hiring a multi-pastoral staff. While each of the pastors are expected to conduct worship services, each has a specialty such as youth, Christian education or small groups while one serves as lead pastor. Advantages of this arrangement are obvious. The multiple gifts and specialized training of each of the pastors

gives the churches access to a wider variety of resourcing, while being able to maintain their local church ministry.

In other cases, churches of different denominations but in the same community have joined to share a pastor. This can work, but nearly always leads to discussions of merger. In cases of very different backgrounds, some churches have compromised to join a third denomination that allows all congregants freedom to fully participate. Taking into account the shrinkage of many of our smaller towns with multiple small churches, this option should be considered. Community churches with multiple denominational affiliations or with one agree-upon affiliation can often better serve the needs of the communities. Conversely, due to history or strong doctrinal convictions, such unions typically result in some members attending a compatible church in another community or withdrawing from fellowship completely. This weakens the community church and may further divide the community.

Churches sharing a pastor should recognize and accept the following:

- They exhibit commitment to operate as long as possible as a free-standing church
- They will need to give up the idea of “our” pastor in the singular and accept the notion of a shared pastor (Some kinds of sharing do not get easier after kindergarten.)
- Depending on the pastor’s leadership and the church’s response to it, not much will in all probability change. The church will continue to decline or remain the same size, reflecting the relative size of the community. Lines drawn in the community will still be there. The “unreachables” will likely still be unreachable.
- Pastoral changes will be more complicated, involving more than one congregation.
- Regular, ongoing negotiation regarding each church’s fair share of pastoral compensation is required.

The following section added after first edition:
--

Bi-Vocational Pastor

A bi-vocation pastor is one who derives a significant portion of his income from a source other than the church(es) he serves. Rural communities pose specific challenges in establishing long-term bi-vocational pastoral relationships, including the following:

- The relatively small number of pastors who desire a bi-vocational position
- Family issues related to the isolation of rural communities, especially for those not used to the rural lifestyle
- Finding adequate employment that matches the pastor’s skills and time available
- Developing understandings with the congregation regarding job description and time expended in ministry-related activities
- Finding adequate, affordable housing for churches without parsonages
- The high potential of burn-out for a pastor holding down one or more jobs outside of the church

Yet, a bi-vocational pastor in the right place with proper support can make deep impacts in a community. Consider some of the advantages:

- The church can continue its ministry even if numbers and finances are low
- Both church and community benefit from a trained pastor who will likely take up residence in the community
- The pastor may have natural contacts in the community due to his other career
- The pastor can expand or contract outside work depending upon the church's ability to provide support
- The pastor can use technical skills including online computer abilities to create or continue a profitable companion career

Selected Online Resources:

[Lifeway Ministries](#)

[Parsonage.Org – Should I Become a Bi-vocational Pastor?](#)

[What Should A Church Pay A Bi-vocational Pastor?](#)

[Bi-Vocational Ministry Packet](#) – Mennonite Brethren

[Supporting the Bi-vocational Pastor](#)