

*As published in Ministry Today Magazine*

# Successful Rural Ministry

*Ministering in a rural church comes with unique challenges that set it apart from ministry in more populous areas. But it can be done successfully.*

By Robert Engelhardt

It was a frigid day in late November 1990. I was on the pastoral team of Ravena Bible Church near Albany, New York, led by Bill Hull. John Kelly was ministering in our church that weekend and had invited me to join him at a local diner after the evening service. After some small talk, he told me about another church that might present an opportunity for me to take the pastorate. He explained that this church was very small, not much more than a home group, but that the current pastor was anxious to leave. That evening marked the beginning of the most wonderful and exciting adventure in my life. Six months later our family was moving 90 miles away to the tiny Catskill Mountain village of Margaretville, New York, population 650.

Surrounded by picturesque mountaintops, plush forests, gurgling streams and cold mountain lakes, Margaretville is a natural amusement park and a sportsman's paradise. My wife, Nancy, and I have always considered ourselves country folks, but still, the smallness and remoteness of Margaretville took even us by surprise.

Since coming to Margaretville now more than 17 years ago, our church has grown in spurts from a membership of 20 to approximately 250. It has been hard work. We realized almost immediately that a rural church brings with it a very unique set of needs, opportunities and resources. The following are some of the insights we have gained while building and ministering in a rural church.

## **FALSE ASSUMPTIONS**

There have been many unique difficulties and false assumptions about rural churches that we've had to overcome since starting our work. Here are three:

**Assumption No. 1: Rural churches are hokey.** This is the idea that it is OK for country churches to be hokey and unprofessional, not needing to pursue excellence.

I have been surprised many times by core church members whom I assumed were not affected by this mind-set only to discover otherwise. Comments such as, "It doesn't really matter, it's only us," reveal a cancerous, small-minded attitude. From bulletins, signs and press releases to music presentations, church cleaning and decorum, we have had to consciously combat this second-class mentality by consistently and vigorously imparting a spirit of excellence.

Our church members universally agree that we are all working together to build something unique and wonderful. We are not big budget, but we have found we can produce a very appealing country image that does not come across as unprofessional by using a little money wisely along with plenty of liberally applied elbow grease and creativity.

**Assumption No. 2: Rural churches can't grow.** The second most destructive attitude we have had to contend with is a belief that because ours is a rural church, it will always be extremely small.

I came to Margaretville with an initial vision for a 200-member church. From the start, I was assaulted with a constant stream of voices from both inside and outside the church trying to convince me that because most churches in our community have an average Sunday attendance between 30 and 40, we would never grow much larger. But we have. And now that we have reached the 250 mark, God has spoken to me about upgrading our vision beyond 500.

For me the basic issue of church size boils down to how many unchurched people are in our area. I am really not swayed by the sizes of other congregations or any other discouraging "facts." As Nancy and I drive the back roads and small villages around our beautiful mountains, we are always in awe of the number of people tucked away here and there. We know how desperately these people need Jesus, and we also know they are the reason we have been sent. We hear the horror stories of child abuse, depression, unemployment, alcoholism, adultery, suicide, rape, poverty and divorce, and I can't help but conclude that Margaretville doesn't only need a church of 250; it needs a church of at least 500, or maybe 1000.

However, I do not want to confuse the issue of numerical increase with quality of body life. One of my greatest concerns is whether we will be able to build upon the rich sense of community we now enjoy. There is a lot of good to be said for the intimacy and security of a small, rural church family. On the other hand, as long as the Great Commission is part of our core values, we will ardently pursue growth. But defining success only by numbers is a terrible mistake.

**Assumption No. 3: Staff and congregation are second-class.** Many people erroneously believe that rural churches have ministers who just aren't good enough for a suburban or city church, or that the congregation is made up of people who are essentially ignorant hicks. Not only is this attitude prevalent among the unsaved, but also frequently the sting of condescension can be felt from pastors and members of other churches who judge the value of the work by the size of budgets, buildings, congregation and social-economic status. Sharing the unique victories of leading a rural church does not frequently impress people.

In our mountain church, we have a wonderful and diverse collection of people: black, white, Hispanic, wealthy, poor, highly educated and uneducated. We are a very diverse group of people who have decided live a rural life. We have always conducted our

ministry under the assumption that another prominent member of our church—the Lord Jesus Christ—came not for the healthy but the sick.

## **PROS AND CONS**

There are a few other unique difficulties in leading a rural church. For example, it is a real problem taking advantage of concerts, conferences, big-name speakers and other joint events such as March for Jesus because of the travel time. It always takes a lot of extra work for us to interact with and feel like a part of the greater body of Christ. Even our regional events always include hours of road time.

I have noticed that some in our congregation, after years of traveling to meetings, are not nearly as quick to volunteer for a road trip unless it is really important. Another related problem occurs when you put yourself on the line and promote an event, travel two hours to get there, and it ends up being a dud. This can really affect your credibility with the congregation.

Another disadvantage of rural church ministry is income. Because earning levels tend to be somewhat lower in rural communities, while most living expenses are pretty much the same, church finances are directly reflective. Due to this, a rural church has to become much larger than a city or suburban church to have a comparable cash flow. Although the work of rural ministry is just as demanding as city ministry, many rural pastors have to work outside the church to earn enough to support their families. Through the years I have sometimes had the feeling that I am more of a foreign missionary than a domestic pastor.

Far greater than the problems, however, are the advantages of a rural church. For example, a church that would be considered small in a large community can actually be a mega-church in a small community. Proportionately speaking, a country church of 100 should have the impact of a church of 10,000 in a city.

Our church of 250 has a huge impact in our area. Nearly everyone in our region knows who we are, what we do and what we stand for. On one occasion several years ago, for example, we raised \$3,000 to save a family's home from foreclosure—normal work for the body of Christ—but this actually became front-page news in our little community.

In a rural area, there is generally less to do in terms of entertainment and social interaction, especially during the winter months when most of the outdoor activities cease. This presents a splendid opportunity for a rural church to meet the needs of the community. In the winter months, we always load up our church calendar with lots of family-fun events such as game nights, men's breakfasts, concerts, aerobic classes and arts and crafts. All of these events are economical and provide not only warm church body life, but also great opportunities for relational evangelism.

Advertising costs are less expensive in a rural area, and there are many free advertising opportunities available. Many local rural newspapers will print, for free, almost any press

release they receive from a church, provided it is tastefully written. They may also welcome inspirational and spiritual columns. The nice thing about rural newspapers is that almost everyone in the community reads them.

The display ad rates are usually extremely reasonable in rural newspapers. An idea we use sometimes at Christmas is to collect a few dollars from each church family to have their names printed in a special ad. We call it our Community Christmas Card and use it to send Christmas blessings from our church family to our entire community. For this ad we take an entire half page, and it's not that expensive--only \$5 each from 80 families equals a total cost of \$400. This idea is very well received by our community.

Other areas of cost-effective rural advertising are community bulletin boards, door-to-door flier distribution, public access cable and local radio stations. In much of our rural area, radio reception is very limited, so our radio show is the only thing most radios can pick up. This outreach results in a continual stream of positive feedback and has added families to our church.

In a rural area it is easy for a pastor to take a leadership role in the community. Organizing activities for events such as the National Day of Prayer or participating in a local ministers' group or civic organization can do a lot to expand the influence of the church, increase your credibility and pull the local Christian community together. Allowing the larger Christian community to perceive you not as a threat, but as someone dedicated to the community and a voice to the unchurched, will earn you the freedom to evangelize boldly and freely.

## **TIPS FOR RURAL PASTORS**

Following are the top 10 tips I have discovered for success in rural ministry:

1. Love your community. Either God has sent you or He hasn't. If He has, there is no excuse not to love and fully pour yourself into your community. If He hasn't, then you should get out.
2. Stay busy. Rural areas do not have the fast pace and energetic lifestyle of the city, so it is easy to be drawn into a lazy approach to ministry. Keep the church calendar filled with spiritual and social functions that will promote both Christian growth and rich, wholesome body life.
3. Start home groups. Home groups are an indispensable part of a rural church model. They provide leadership opportunities, relational bonding, an evangelistic platform and the personal ministry element needed for a healthy, organic, church-growth dynamic.
4. Use your pulpit wisely. Use your pulpit ministry to impart life, vision, hope and direction to your congregation. Rural people, especially lower-income people, can sometimes get stuck in a small-town, second-class mind-set. They need a faith-filled

pastor to lift their hearts and eyes to define opportunities, promote creativity, break out of the generational oppression and to be their cheerleader as they attempt to overcome.

5. Don't whine. Don't waste your time feeling sorry for yourself for what you don't have. Entertaining voices that say things such as, "I would be successful if I had more money, my people were not as dysfunctional, I had more talented music people, I were in a more populated area," and so on, are destructive and distracting. These voices cause you to stop seeking God in an optimistic way for victory to come through your present situation. If David slew Goliath with a sling, then you can build the church God called you to build.

6. Stay apostolically connected. I call our apostolic colleagues, church doctors because they periodically come to our church, by my request, and assess our ministry. A good apostle has the unique and precious gifting of being able to point out things that need to be adjusted, and like real fathers, a connected apostle is only a phone call away in case of emergency. This has proven to be invaluable on several critical occasions.

7. Promote and encourage participation in select conferences. By far the most important, effective and life-changing weeks of the year for our church are various men's, women's, and youth conferences. They are the best ministry tools available to a rural pastor. Like a shot of adrenaline, a good conference can refocus, energize, provide strategic training and prophetically align your church.

8. Stay committed to your peer level relationships. This can be more work than it sounds like, especially for rural ministers. Nancy and I have diligently maintained a number of healthy relationships with like minded ministry couples, and these pastoral friends provide critical input and perspective. Most people, even inside the church, have no idea what you do. The regular interaction and accountability with like-minded peers serves to prevent isolation so you don't become a lone ranger.

9. Bring in guest ministers. Visiting ministries make you feel connected and offer a variety of styles and gifts that are very healthy for a rural church. Your people won't have to run to every other church's special events if you will serve them a full plate. I usually try to schedule one guest minister per month.

10. Have faith. To have faith for God to establish His kingdom in a rural area is a wonderful opportunity. Although the principles utilized in building a rural church are eternal, biblical and universally effective, many of the practices and strategies are unique. If you accept the call to rural ministry, you accept a noble call. Your church may not sparkle with the glitter of high-profile ministry, and the Christian media may not be knocking down your door for an interview, but you just might participate in a real, live miracle.

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