

12 PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE RURAL MINISTRY

Rural ministry has a real attraction: Idyllic settings, close caring communities, unhurried lifestyle. Yet these very advantages have their costs. Isolation, lack of resources, complex relationships. Rural ministry takes place within a culture surprisingly removed from the norms of urban life. There are important aspects of country culture to understand and embrace before attempting to lead a rural congregation into change.

1. Learn the stories

Every community has its own stories. The past, present and future of any country community is wrapped tightly in a fabric of stories that get told over and over again. These heritage stories shape the identity and self concept of the group. The continuity of these is particularly important for rural churches. The most effective work in rural parishes comes out of hearing, learning and affirming the community's own stories. Future ministry needs to stand in continuity with the life-affirming stories of the past. The most important connection an incoming pastor can make is to sit with storytellers and understand the history and identity of the congregation they are called to. A congregation will only journey somewhere new when it is confident that its leaders know its story and stand in line with its history. Sometimes the gentle embracing of these stories may bring healing to a painful past.

2. Align yourself with the community's sense of ownership

In any rural community, the land possesses a character and value that is hard for an urban soul to comprehend. Rural communities have a deep sense of ownership over their land and its geographic features. People refer to it as a 'sense of place'.

Where I live, all of us who have grown up in the community know that we have a stake in the mountain that overshadows our lives. Every morning we open the curtains to look at the mountain. We speak of it as if we somehow own it in a way that visitors, tourists or even climbers don't. You know when a newcomer to our town belongs – they begin to talk like us. They begin to love our mountain as we do and stake their own claim by calling it 'my mountain'. We smile at this because we understand the feeling and we know the person is 'in'.

In a rural community you are never 'in' until you align yourself with the community's sense of ownership. The new school principal in my town was 'in' when he had climbed the mountain and spent some time looking down at the town from that perspective. To integrate into a rural community you have to say goodbye to whatever place you came from (without unfavourable comparisons, no matter how bleak your new place is) and embrace the place to which you now belong. If you don't want to belong there, you never will. Find the symbolic sense of place and align yourself with it.

3. Exegete the system

Rural churches are typically tribal in structure. They gather around several key families and people. There are important rules that operate within these systems. Individual people have significant roles that permit or limit what can and can't be done. The congregation has built in ways of decision-making. There is a strong sense of community and an equally strong sense of conservatism. All this adds up to stubborn stability, which is a strength as much as a weakness. Often the documented goals of the church (relevance, growth, friendliness to the wider community) are the opposite of what actually takes place (traditional rituals, decline, isolation from the

wider community). You cannot be an agent for change with carefully drawing out (exegeting) the **rules, roles, rituals** and **goals**, which make up the system. Only when they have been documented and understood can they be challenged and addressed.

Once you have some understanding of how and why this congregation functions, its time to begin building for change.

4. **Resource the leaders**

One of the realities of country life is that key people are often under-resourced with ideas and information. Existing church leaders need to be exposed thoughtfully to new ideas and materials. Rural people usually respond positively to seeing ideas in action. Take them on exposure trips to conferences and other churches. Give them videos, tapes and articles. Mentor and equip them. Home grown leaders are critical for bringing change. They will lead it far more successfully than any incoming pastor.

5. **Love, nurture and mentor the young people**

Young people are important in any community, however in rural communities they occupy a special place precisely because many of them will leave. Churches know that they have them for only so long and they are highly valued. Often they are feared for as they leave. Some pastors hesitate to invest heavily in young people knowing that most will not stay long term in the church but this is a serious mistake. Rural churches need a deep conviction that they are called to prepare and send out healthy, integrated, dynamic Christian young people. Any minister who makes this a priority will be loved and respected in a country church by families and the youth alike.

6. **Establish and support a pastoral care ministry team**

Country people relate to each other between Sunday's far more than urban people. They regularly meet while shopping, working, socialising, even driving. They know what is happening in other's lives to a significant and surprising extent. This is both a disadvantage in terms of gossip but an advantage in terms of care and support. Pastoral care brings a noticeable connection into rural people's lives. It builds community. Get a caring team of people mobilised to respond pastorally and practically to the congregation's needs. Country people, even the unchurched, are used to looking to the church for help when urban people typically find it in other places. A particularly important pastoral window of opportunity is 'crisis'. Country people rally at a crisis – people come out of the woodwork to help when someone's home burns down, a child is seriously injured in an accident, a mother becomes ill. It is part of the country spirit to do whatever you can to be there and help when professional assistance may be out of reach or hours away. The minister who is right there in the heart of the community's response sends a key message of care and support to the community. People notice who turns up and who stays away when the chips are down. Helping at these times breeds a deep sense of loyalty from country people. Crises are powerful ways to connect right into the core of rural families in a way country people understand and appreciate.

7. **Socialise across the boundaries**

This one will bring some criticism but its a must. Every country community has a range of social groupings. Some of these rarely intersect. Church people may not generally be involved in some sports groups, service clubs, community groups, community leadership or leisure pursuits. There may be pubs and clubs that they normally never attend. Congregations need to connect with the social structures of their communities if they are going to be effective in outreach. Ministers need to

informally connect across as many of these groups as possible – the opportunities for ministry are often startling. Chaplaincy is an excellent model for this kind of ministry. A rural minister can connect powerfully with schools, rural industries, and even local municipal councils.

8. Integrate newcomers

One of the great gifts to rural churches are the people who turn up in town often for only a short time. In some cases these are young professional people on rural placements – teachers, doctors, lawyers. In other cases they are moving in to stay having made a lifestyle choice to live in the country. It is critical for country communities to welcome and embrace newcomers. Rural communities are usually very good at this and easily make people feel welcome when they first arrive. It is a harder task to effectively integrate them into the life of the church. They often bring encouraging gifts and experience. It is important for pastors to pace the integration of new people carefully, not overloading newcomers with responsibility but not hanging back too far and failing to embrace them and use their gifts appropriately. Newcomers need time to assimilate the church's background and history and connect with the people. In a short time, newcomers can often make a very important contribution as traditional congregational members can be surprisingly open to them and connect to them deeply – in some cases 'adopting' them a little like their own children who may live away.

9. Communicate everything to everyone

As alluded to above, country people are used to knowing what is going on. Almost everything that happens in the life of the church is important to them. It is crucial for rural parish leaders to be good at communication, verbally, via the parish newsletter, on the phone and through the prayer chain. Secrets in a country town can be destructive. It is well worth cultivating healthy communication networks and using them well. The issue of gossip does need to be addressed but the answer is not less communication - it is insisting on integrity, honesty and relentless goodwill in speech about other situations and people.

10. Prepare for conflict

Conflict is unavoidable in small congregations. The best answer for it is to prepare up-front. Equip leaders and congregational members for having a healthy disagreement and working through it. Teach forgiveness, conflict management skills, communication skills and about personality differences. Conflict can be handled well and be creative for a church but it must be prepared for. Speak and teach expectantly about 'when' not 'if' we have our next conflict and you will take away the fear that close knit communities have of a fight or split. Use every small opportunity to equip people with conflict skills and reinforce the idea that conflict is creative and can be handled well.

11. Engage visiting (apostolic) preachers

An unusual aspect of congregational life in many country churches is the role played by visiting preachers or teachers. Churches often form a deep attachment to particular people who have encouraged, advised and assisted them regularly in the past. Over time and several visits, these preachers take on an almost apostolic role in the life of the church. The power that these people have can be a threat to a new minister arriving in the church. But this need not be the case. The apostolic visitor can be an important agent for change and growth in the life of the church. Sometimes this person can say things that a resident minister can not. It is important to understand who these

individuals are and get to know them and their history with the church. Build healthy relationships with them as this is good for everyone, them, the church and the pastor.

12. Get out of town regularly

In spite of all the positives of rural ministry; a rural congregation can be narrow, claustrophobic and frustratingly conservative. It is important to have a way to be able to regularly get out of the community and take a break from the intensity of rural life. Rural life lacks anonymity. Ministers and their families need times of escape from the pressure especially if they are not used to rural lifestyle. A well thought out self-care strategy is essential for rural ministry. Have a good mentor to debrief with and take regular days off. On retreat days get outside the community and look at it from a distance.

Rural ministry has much in common with ministry anywhere but it takes place in unique culture. Incoming pastors cannot be effective until they understand, enter and work within the unique environment of the 'place' God calls them to be.

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