

## Renewed Interest: A Fresh Look at the Rural Church

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A renewed national interest in the rural and small town church presents a unique opportunity to pursue new dialogue, establish new structures and networks, develop new resources, and pursue the creative use of assets and creative solutions for issues common to the rural and small town ministry context.

This paper will explore this renewed interest then seek to apply this growing field of data to local church ministry along the Wild Rivers Coast, a geographic area extending from northwestern California into southwestern Oregon.

First, this paper will document the current resurgence of interest in the rural and small town church. Second, it will explore the common aspects of ministry in this setting, but note that more research is needed to capture the nature of this ministry in all its various contexts. Third, it will argue that the renewed interest in the rural and small town church should be leveraged to accelerate the ongoing development of dialogue, structures and networks, resources, and other creative ideas for the use of assets along with the exploration of solutions for common challenges.

### Qualitative research

A small-scale qualitative research effort was conducted in the preparation of this paper along the Wild Rivers Coast (WRC). The regional home of this author, the WRC is a geographic area extending from the Klamath River, in extreme northwestern California, to the mouth of the Umpqua River in southwestern Oregon. It is home to approximately 125,000 people living in small towns and tribal lands spread over 4,100 square miles.

Three pastors were interviewed and asked a series of questions related to the primary topics addressed in this paper.<sup>1</sup> The first is the leader of a church in Green Acres, Oregon, an unincorporated area approximately 10 miles south of the city of Coos Bay. The pastor estimates that there are 300 homes in the immediate area, but noted that the church draws from the larger region and has an average of 65 - 75 in attendance on a Sunday morning. The church is unaffiliated, was established in 1942, and the pastor has served in his position for 30 years. He was originally sent out by Village Missions<sup>2</sup> and is still serving as a missionary with that organization. The second is the pastor of a denominationally-affiliated church in Brookings, Oregon, population roughly 6,400. The church was established in 1969 and he has served in his position for 4 years. The average Saturday night and Sunday morning attendance is 365. The third serves in Hiouchi, California, an unincorporated community of 300 northeast of Crescent City, California. The church is independent and was established in 2010, with the pastor serving in his position since then. Sunday morning attendance is 50 - 60, and the church draws attendees from nearby Crescent City (population approximately 7,700), adjacent Tribal Lands, and other surrounding communities. The responses of these pastors to the various issues addressed are included throughout this paper.

## **There is a Renewed Interest in the Rural or Small Town Church**

Pastor and author Tim Keller launched the organization Redeemer City to City in 2001. Since then this vital initiative has helped start more than 380 churches in 54 cities.<sup>3</sup> Over the past 16 years, through his writing, teaching, and leadership, Keller has helped cast a compelling vision for church planting and urban-focused ministry. Anthony Bradley, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at King's College in New York, writes, "Tim Keller... persuaded an entire generation of evangelicals to care about cities".<sup>4</sup> Recently however, there is a growing concern that the admirable and necessary focus on the city has come at a cost for ministry in rural areas. Michael Kruger states it plainly "...this interest in the urban has sometimes turned into a superiority of the urban, and even a disdain of the rural."<sup>5</sup> Bradley adds in agreement, "Where are the leaders who care about the other places where people are dying of hopelessness?"<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, there is now increasing evidence that such leaders are beginning to emerge and efforts are being developed that reflect a renewed concern for these "other places." On the academic level, Thomas Robinson has published his study, *Who Were the First Christians? Dismantling the Urban Thesis*. Kruger writes that this volume "...provides a helpful corrective" and "...tackles a widespread (and near-consensus) belief among modern scholars that the earliest Christians were almost exclusively urban,"<sup>7</sup> a position that provided the necessary support for an urban-centric focus in church planting. Also, in the fall of 2017 The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College launched the Rural Matters Institute, affirming "...an emerging movement to plant churches in rural areas."<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging that "the rural heartland has gradually become under-resourced, overlooked, and often forgotten," the stated purpose of this new community is to act as a resource, support, and encouragement for those working in non-urban environments.<sup>9</sup> This growing interest has also been fueled by pastors and authors such as Tom Nebel, *Big Dreams in Small Places*, Shannon O'Dell, *Transforming Church*, Robert Wuthnow, *Small Town America*, and more recently by Pastor Brad Roth and his volume, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, among others.

This movement is also now being reflected in the growth of regional conferences specifically designed to address issues of concern to rural church leaders. For example, Pastor and author Donnie Griggs<sup>10</sup> first began speaking on issues related to rural church planting in 2014, and since then Griggs and others have organized "The Small Town Jesus Conferences", conducting two in 2017.<sup>11</sup> Plans for 2018 include five conferences, with four in the U.S. and the first international event in England. Additionally, locations and dates are already being booked for 2019, reflecting the level of interest and the desire of practitioners for a forum addressing this topic.<sup>12</sup> Pastor Stephen Witmer, in his work with the Gospel Coalition of New England, also saw the need to "get beyond the city to where the people are... a small town venue (addressing) small town issues... by small town, for small town." They recently conducted their first conference, "A Big Gospel in Small Places" in Loudon, New Hampshire and plans are already underway for more.<sup>13</sup>

All of these efforts, combined with the sociological issues addressed later in this paper, reflect a resurgence of interest and concern for the state of rural communities in general and local churches in particular. Lastly, these recent developments are supplementing the long-time faithful efforts of various denominations<sup>14</sup> and organizations such as Village Missions, which has been serving local churches in rural communities across North America since 1948.<sup>15</sup>

### **But what is rural or small town?**

Population statistics and the definition of rural and small town varies. Griggs cites a U.S. Census Bureau estimate from 2010 that lists 16,307 towns in the U.S. with a population under 25,000, for a total of 33.7 million nationwide.<sup>16</sup> Wuthnow references similar numbers.<sup>17</sup> However, the Rural Matters Institute cites 51 million rural residents, a significantly higher number constituting 17% of the U.S. population.<sup>18</sup> Finding a common definition for the rural and small town is even more complex. Hagan notes that rural varies from the tourist destination to farmland to mining communities and more.<sup>19</sup>

This diversity and complexity was reflected even in the very small sample size taken through field interviews along the WRC in the preparation of this paper. Although all three pastors agreed that their context was rural and/or small town, the realities of their context varied significantly. The setting that was the most “country” as the pastor described it (noting, tongue-in-cheek, that their gravel driveway was the defining factor), actually experienced the greatest influence by the proximity of a large town. Another noted the significant ethnic diversity among their church attendees, while the others were essentially monocultural.

So what is rural or small town? This paper uses these labels interchangeably to include the wide variety of contexts represented nationally and even regionally. Roth is helpful as he notes “the most obvious and most significant difference between rural and urban is population” but adds that “apart from columns on census charts, the differences between rural and urban are hard to track”, concluding that there is such wide variation in rural settings that it literally comes down to a familiarity with neighbors, size, amenities, and mindset, a “spiritual and psychological landscape populated by a relationship to the city.” In many ways, Roth writes, being “small town” comes down to self-definition.<sup>20</sup>

### **Meeting a need**

Whatever its scope and ultimate definition, it is this context that is the concern of organizations like the Rural Matters Institute<sup>21</sup> and Village Missions,<sup>22</sup> and it is those ministering in this setting that are the target of efforts by conference organizers like Pastors Stephen Witmer and Donnie Griggs. Both Witmer and Griggs share personal anecdotes regarding the passionate response of rural and small town church leaders to the networking and training opportunities they offer. Griggs writes,

“...as I’ve started receiving opportunities to speak on this subject, I’ve been met by people crying and expressing to me that this was the first time they have heard that ministry in a small town was legitimate or necessary.”<sup>23</sup>

In a personal conversation with this author he added that he frequently hears comments such as “no one has ever taken us seriously” and “no one ever speaks into our context.” In his opinion there is “a real vacuum” that has been created by the neglect of rural and small town ministry.<sup>24</sup> Witmer concurs and has received similar feedback from conference participants.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, there were varying levels of agreement regarding the degree of neglect towards rural churches by the larger Body of Christ and different levels of enthusiasm regarding broad initiatives aimed at the rural and small town church by the three local pastors who participated in the interviews. Regarding a sense of under-representation, one agreed, one disagreed, and one did not feel adequately informed on the topic so declined to comment. Could the church at large offer resources, conferences, and training that a small town pastor would find helpful? One replied “If you’re coming with the attitude to help because we’re helpless? Don’t do me any favors,” reflecting a skepticism that outsiders would truly approach a rural ministry with respect and humility. A second acknowledged that even though he was receiving adequate support through his denomination, other pastors he knew felt “alone and isolated”, so for them such efforts might be encouraging. Only one of the three felt that this was indeed a “missing segment,” and that these efforts would “truly be effective.” Further field research among the churches on the WRC is needed in order to establish an identifiable pattern.

### **Renewed Interest in the Rural or Small Town Church Presents an Opportunity**

As shown, there is a demonstrable increase in interest in the rural or small town church as reflected in recent publications, establishment of organizations, and various gatherings. There is some indication that this is a reaction to the focus on the urban environment that has occurred since the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>26</sup> along with a growing awareness of challenges in that small town and rural context.<sup>27</sup> Recent

political and sociological events and concerns have strongly energized this interest, not only among Christians but in the society at large, as discussed later in this paper. This renewed interest presents a unique opportunity for dialogue, the development of resources, and the extension of networks that could have a mutually beneficial impact on both the rural and small town church and the Body of Christ as a whole.

### **Unique aspects of local church ministry in the rural and small town context**

Conceptions of life in rural and small towns, and the churches that inhabit them, tend towards two extremes. Some imagine "...a positive sentimental vision of the untouched countryside populated by good-hearted people",<sup>28</sup> while others envision a populace that is "ignorant, racist, or aggressively backward", inhabiting a dystopian society falling "into unprecedented social disintegration"<sup>29</sup> with churches in those communities rapidly disappearing.<sup>30</sup> As expected, the reality is something in between and can vary significantly. There are, however, several common elements that can be identified and addressed.

The following section will briefly consider common aspects of rural and small town life and the opportunities and challenges present, both in these communities in general and in the church specifically. Then a comparison will be made between those broader realities and the particular context of the WRC.

### **Rural and small town communities: Trends, opportunities, and challenges**

Much of the current literature tends to focus on the negative aspects and the decline in the rural and small town setting.<sup>31</sup> While it's true that these communities face significant challenges, there are many positive trends and opportunities present. Proponents will typically point to a strong sense of community as a primary attribute. For example, Warren speaks of the value of being "known" in an increasingly disconnected and anonymous world.<sup>32</sup> Roth shares similar praise, pointing to trust, knowing your neighbor, and a general familiarity,<sup>33</sup> along with a sense that local leaders and decision makers are more accessible in a "tight-knit community".<sup>34</sup> Also, rural and small town residents are said to be resilient and self-reliant, possessing a strong work ethic and "can-do" attitude.<sup>35</sup> Further, there is access to and appreciation for open spaces and natural beauty<sup>36</sup> and the "quiet, simplicity, and smallness" that comes with the slower pace of rural life.<sup>37</sup>

Despite these positive elements, it's certainly true that the challenges faced by contemporary rural and small town communities are significant. In a staggering list repeated by many, Warren cites poverty, widespread unemployment, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, out-of-wedlock births, and rising suicide rates.<sup>38</sup> Wuthnow adds a lack of quality health care, educational opportunities, and poor transportation infrastructure.<sup>39</sup> Finally, rural and small town communities are faced with a declining and ageing population as youth and young families migrate to the cities.<sup>40</sup>

With some variation, the attributes or opportunities noted are consistent with the feedback from the pastors interviewed along the WRC. All agreed that there was a slower pace, and a simplicity to life in their respective communities, and each pointed to the natural beauty of the area as a significant asset. The biggest differences seemed to come from the proximity of the Green Acres church to the much larger town of Coos Bay, which diminished their sense of place. When asked to name the greatest asset in the community, they all mentioned the people, followed by the natural resources and, in one instance, the church itself.

In the same way, the list of challenges compiled through research resonated with these leaders, although the degree of impact was much lower in the smaller community of Green Acres. One very consistent theme was the issue of an ageing population and the difficulty in retaining youth or the migration of youth to urban areas. In fact, one pastor listed that as the greatest challenge in his community and said that he could think of "8 or 9 college students that had left the area for Portland (Oregon)." The other two interviewees mentioned poverty and a lack of spiritual interest as the most significant issues. A common issue not directly addressed in the interview questions is the extreme independence of the average person in rural Oregon. It was mentioned several times by each respondent.

## The rural and small town church: Trends, opportunities, and challenges

Similar to the literature on rural and small towns, the emphasis regarding the churches in these communities is typically negative. Warren writes of a populace that is “Christian” in name only, rarely attending a Sunday service and living as functional secularists. Even if they were to attend a church, they would typically find that it had “lost (its) focus on robust theological teaching and spiritual formation.”<sup>41</sup> Griggs gives an equally gloomy analysis of the spiritual condition of rural and small towns and the health of their churches.<sup>42</sup> The Rural Matters Institute agrees, citing this same issue of spiritual decline in its Advocacy Paper, adding that rural and small town churches also have “limited access to resources and programs,” they struggle with a “lack of momentum,” and are often led by bi-vocational pastors who have limited experience and training.<sup>43</sup> Congregations in these churches are “ageing and change resistant,” they struggle with finances, adequate facilities and other resources, and finally, they are challenged by a constantly shifting, transient, and declining population and the absence of children and families.<sup>44</sup>

Although these challenges are significant, many positive aspects of rural and small town church life have been identified. Primarily, these assets are related to the opportunity to live in community. Witmer writes of a special intimacy small church leaders form with their people, of “knowing them deeply and loving them well,” and the “pleasures of life in a community where you are known.”<sup>45</sup> Roth shares a similar sentiment.<sup>46</sup> In fact, a sense of family and deep relationships seem to be one thing that rural congregations have in abundance. Zylstra recounts one small town pastor who said, “It’s not that there isn’t community; it’s that there is so much community!”<sup>47</sup>

This sense of togetherness has benefits outside an individual church, as local congregations in the rural or small town context are more likely to cooperate together. Hagan speaks of “...the growing number of small congregations (who) pool resources to engage communities.”<sup>48</sup> Meador recounts several stories of leaders crossing denominational lines to share teaching duties.<sup>49</sup> There is also a greater likelihood that church-goers will be aware of and able to quickly respond to needs within the community. Griggs shares that their church “frequently (has) the privilege to serve hurting and marginalized people in our town” promoting the idea that “The entire community should flourish because we are living there for Jesus.”<sup>50</sup> This wider focus seems to give rural and small town churches a greater visibility and a sense of value in the community. Donaldson writes that this is appropriate as the “...local church is still the best equipped (organization) to facilitate healthy development” in the communities they serve.<sup>51</sup> In considering the daunting challenges facing rural and small town America, Warren writes, “...there is still the question of where the church fits into all of this.”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the asset of deep community would be a place to start.

In contrast to the lists of opportunities and challenges in the community at large, there was significant variation among the pastors interviewed when considering the typical rural church and their particular local congregation. Two gave high marks to the sense of family and relational priority within the church, while the third did not. Only one saw a significant level of cooperation between local congregations. However, all agreed that their church was highly visible in the community, that they were perceived as a valuable resource, and that their people were aware of and responded quickly to local needs.

Regarding challenges, there was little commonality among the three and the state of rural and small town churches indicated by the research. None were experiencing pressure from a lack of finances or other resources and none were experiencing declining attendance, a lack of momentum, or resistance to change. Only one noted a constant turnover in attendees, and another cited the absence of youth or young families. The only challenge shared by the three churches and the factors uncovered in the research was a declining spiritual interest in the surrounding community. Even then, one pastor qualified his statement by saying that there was a general spiritual interest, but not in organized religion. A wider scope of research along the WRC is needed to confirm or modify these initial results.

## **Leveraging Assets and Addressing Challenges**

Roth writes “one of the most vital gifts we give our (small town) communities is being present. We show up, and stay put.”<sup>53</sup> One important way to express that ongoing presence is a commitment to advocate for creative action. This paper argues that the renewed interest in the rural and small town ministry context provides a unique opportunity. The time is right to harness the current momentum through the ongoing development of dialogue, structures and networks, resources, and other creative ideas for the leverage of assets and the exploration of solutions for common challenges.

### **A continuing and expanding dialogue**

A primary need are efforts that promote a continuing and expanding dialogue, particularly in the area of academic research addressing the variation in context within the broader category of rural and small town. As Hagan asks, “Which is the *real* rural America—ski slopes of California, mines of West Virginia, farms in Iowa, or exurban resort and manufacturing communities in Georgia?”<sup>54</sup> In their 2016 strategy briefing, the Rural Matters Institute offers nine distinct regions that constitute rural America, and even begins to suggest context-specific strategies for church planting.<sup>55</sup> However, the Pacific Northwest was noticeably absent in the list of regions, and, as already shown, the variation even within a region can be substantial and seems to be impacted by many factors in addition to geography.

Additionally, a broad-based effort to more widely promote and circulate case studies and lessons learned by those with experience in this context would be helpful. Organizations like Village Missions (VillageMissions.org), One Hope Ministries (through their research affiliation with the Rural Matters Institute), and denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention,<sup>56</sup> Vineyard (VineyardUSA.org), and the Church of the Nazarene (Nazarene.org), among others, could provide valuable insights to the wider Body of Christ.

### **Structures and networks**

Social media, such as the efforts by administrator Wes Holland and the Rural Matters Institute to maintain a presence on Facebook, is tremendously helpful in promoting collaboration and cooperation among those working in the rural and small town context. It is also useful for exposing practitioners to developing resources, such as the Small Town Big Church podcast<sup>57</sup> or the Church Planting and Leadership Fellowship.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the recent regionally-focused conferences targeting rural and small town leaders, Small Town Jesus<sup>59</sup> and The Big Gospel in Small Places by the Gospel Coalition of New England,<sup>60</sup> could be investigated as helpful templates and potentially multiplied through other sponsoring organizations.

### **Resources**

Creative efforts are needed to develop resources specifically designed for the rural and small town church. One pastor interviewed shared the story of a curriculum resource they purchased for use by their children’s ministry. The instructions for the lesson began, “Divide the class up into groups of 10.” His comment? “First we would need 10!” A second pastor described his children’s program as all ages in one room for an hour, including children with special needs. He asked, “What resource is designed to address that situation?” These issues go beyond this one particular ministry area, and it is likely that a thorough review would prove that most resources are designed for churches very different than the typical rural or small town congregation. A limited market, a wide variety of needs, and the related financial challenges for developers make this a particularly difficult issue.

## Leveraging opportunities, addressing challenges

Finally, continuing efforts regarding the development of case studies would be useful, especially those that are focused on church renewal or ongoing church leadership and not specifically targeted towards church planters. In this author's community, the existing churches constitute the single largest organized group. How can those congregations make the most of the opportunities of rural and small town life and be intentional and creative in addressing challenges, both inside the church and in the community at large? Exposure to the experience of others, both in failure and success, would be especially beneficial.

## Conclusion

According to Pastor and author Donnie Griggs, two recent events served as a wake-up call for the general U.S population in regards to rural America. The first was the publication and widespread success of J. D. Vance's book, *Hillbilly Elegy* in 2016. The second was the election of Donald Trump as President. These events, in Griggs' view, "were the tipping point, the 'aha' moment."<sup>61</sup> This opinion is bolstered by the Wall Street journal article, *Rural America is the New 'Inner City'*,<sup>62</sup> and Christianity Today's piece by Tish Harrison Warren, *The America I Forgot*, which carries the subtitle, *This elections has woken up evangelicals like me to the plight of the rural poor.*<sup>63</sup>

This confluence of events and observations has brought rural and small town life and, by association, the rural and small town church, onto the stage of national consciousness. As Griggs observes, "Everyone now knows that small town America is not Christian, and it is clearly a mission field."<sup>64</sup> Time will tell if this renewed interest is only temporary, but it seems likely that in the U.S. it will continue at least through the next Presidential election cycle. Now, while momentum is building and energy is present, the church needs to respond. We must look at the millions living in the rural and small town context, and those who are faithfully ministering to them through the local church, with a new awareness and make renewed efforts to engage, establish, revitalize, and sustain vital Christian community.

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### About the Author

*Rob Foster, the founder and Director of CDI, has 35 years of experience in for-profit and non-profit efforts in the U.S. and in 14 countries around the world. He is a gifted speaker, trainer, strategist, and non-profit practitioner with broad access to various networks. He is uniquely gifted to serve CDI's partners both inside and outside the church community. You can reach Rob at [rfoster@collabdev.org](mailto:rfoster@collabdev.org).*

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Appendix 'A'
- <sup>2</sup> [www.villagemissions.org](http://www.villagemissions.org)
- <sup>3</sup> [www.redeemercitytocity.com](http://www.redeemercitytocity.com)
- <sup>4</sup> Bradley, *A Deadly Crisis in Rural America*
- <sup>5</sup> Kruger, *Remember the Rural*
- <sup>6</sup> Bradley, *A Deadly Crisis in Rural America*
- <sup>7</sup> Kruger, *Remember the Rural*
- <sup>8</sup> [www.bcgruralmatters.com](http://www.bcgruralmatters.com)
- <sup>9</sup> Rural Matters Institute, *Strategy Brief*
- <sup>10</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*
- <sup>11</sup> [www.smalltownjesus.com/events/](http://www.smalltownjesus.com/events/)
- <sup>12</sup> Griggs, personal communication, December 1, 2017
- <sup>13</sup> Witmer, personal communication November 22, 2017
- <sup>14</sup> See Stetzer, *One on One with the Small Church Pastor*; See also Roth, *God's Country*, pp. 19-20
- <sup>15</sup> [www.villagemissions.org](http://www.villagemissions.org); See also Zylstra, *Reviving the Dying Small-Town Church*
- <sup>16</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, p. 56
- <sup>17</sup> Wuthnow. *Small-Town America*, p. 16
- <sup>18</sup> Rural Matters, *Strategy Brief*, p. 2
- <sup>19</sup> Hagan, *Big challenges for small-town congregations*, p. 115.
- <sup>20</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, pp. 22, 25, 27, 31
- <sup>21</sup> Rural Matters, *Advocacy Paper*
- <sup>22</sup> [www.villagemissions.org](http://www.villagemissions.org)
- <sup>23</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, p. 76
- <sup>24</sup> Griggs, personal communication, December 1, 2017
- <sup>25</sup> Witmer, personal communication, November 22, 2017
- <sup>26</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, p. 66
- <sup>27</sup> Witmer, *To Faithful Pastors in Forgotten Places*; Hagan, *Big Challenges*; Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*
- <sup>28</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, p. 15
- <sup>29</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, pp. 66-67
- <sup>30</sup> Ranier, *Five Reasons*
- <sup>31</sup> e.g. Adamy & Overberg, *One Nation, Divisible*
- <sup>32</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, p. 69
- <sup>33</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, pp. 27, 29
- <sup>34</sup> Rural Matters, *Advocacy Paper*
- <sup>35</sup> Hagan, *Big Challenges*; Brown & McCray, *Survey of Rural Challenges 2017*; Rural Matters, *Advocacy Paper*
- <sup>36</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, p. 30
- <sup>37</sup> Meador, *Why We Need Small Towns*, p. 47
- <sup>38</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, p. 66; See also Adamy & Overberg, *One Nation Divisible*; Hagan, *Big Challenges*; Bradley, *A Deadly Crisis*.
- <sup>39</sup> Wuthnow, *Small-Town America*, p. 16; See also Adamy & Overberg, *One Nation Divisible*
- <sup>40</sup> Rural Matters 2016; Witmer, *To Faithful Pastors in Forgotten Places*
- <sup>41</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, pp. 67 - 68
- <sup>42</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, pp. 64-70
- <sup>43</sup> Rural Matters Institute, *Advocacy Paper*, p. 4
- <sup>44</sup> Hagan, *Big Changes*, pp. 118-120; Rural Matters, pp. 3-6; Zylstra, *Reviving the Dying Small-Town Church*
- <sup>45</sup> Witmer, *To Faithful Pastors in Forgotten Places*



- <sup>46</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, pp. 27-29
- <sup>47</sup> Zylstra, *Reviving the Dying Small-Town Church*
- <sup>48</sup> Hagan, *Big challenges for small-town congregations*, p. 121
- <sup>49</sup> Meador, *Why We Need Small Towns*, p. 49
- <sup>50</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, pp.154-155
- <sup>51</sup> Donaldson, *The Rural Reality of Poverty*
- <sup>52</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*, p. 67
- <sup>53</sup> Roth, *God's Country*, p. 213
- <sup>54</sup> Hagan, *Big challenges for small-town congregations*, p. 115 (emphasis in original)
- <sup>55</sup> Rural Matters Institute, *Strategy Briefing 2016*, pp.2 -7
- <sup>56</sup> See Stetzer, *One on One with the Small Church Pastor*
- <sup>57</sup> Sanders, *Big Town Small Church Podcast*
- <sup>58</sup> newsmallchurch.com
- <sup>59</sup> www.smalltownjesus.com
- <sup>60</sup> Witmer, *Going Small with a Big Gospel*
- <sup>61</sup> Griggs, personal communication, December 1, 2017
- <sup>62</sup> Adamy & Overberg, *Rural America is the New 'Inner City'*
- <sup>63</sup> Warren, *The America I Forgot*
- <sup>64</sup> Griggs, personal communication, December 1, 2017
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## **Appendix 'A'**

Field Research: Interviews with Local Church Pastors along the Wild Rivers Coast

### General Questions

- What year was your church established?
- What is your denominational affiliation, if any?
- What is your title, and how long have you served in this position?
- Do you participate in any wider ministerial association or other organization? Describe.
- What is your average Sunday morning attendance?
- How would you describe the demographic of your congregation?
- What do you consider your “community”, or the scope of your ministry area?
- How would you describe your church to others?

### Labels, Assets, and Challenges Regarding the Local Community

- Is the label “Rural” appropriate for your community? Why or why not?
- Is the label “Small Town” appropriate for your community? Why or why not?
- Consider the following list of rural/small town attributes and assets, and compare them to the community surrounding your church. Rate them on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not relevant at all” and 5 being “very common and relevant.”
  - A sense of friendliness and community
  - Strong relational/interpersonal/family networks
  - Ease of access to local leaders (i.e. city council, school officials)
  - High value of volunteerism and community involvement
  - Reasonable cost of living
  - Appreciation of historic culture, heritage, and sense of place
  - Natural beauty and easy access to outdoor recreational activities
  - Slower pace, simplicity, no traffic
  - Low crime, high personal safety
- Finish this sentence: “*The greatest asset in our community is...*”
- Consider the following list of rural/small town issues and challenges and compare them to the community surrounding your church. Rate them on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not relevant at all” and 5 being “very common and relevant.”
  - An older or ageing population

- Poverty
- Widespread drug abuse
- Alcohol abuse/alcoholism
- Rising suicide rates
- Unemployment/underemployment
- Family dysfunction (i.e. divorce, single-parent households, etc)
- Difficulty in retaining youth
- Lack of options for youth
- Lack of quality health care
- Lack of affordable housing
- Lack of educational opportunities
- Poor transportation infrastructure
- Declining population/urban migration
- Shifting population (people frequently arriving and leaving)
- Resistance to change among local leaders
- Conflicts within the community
- Finish this sentence: *“The greatest challenge in our community is...”*

#### Questions Regarding the Local Church

- Finish this sentence: *“The things we have in common with urban and suburban churches are...”*
- Finish this sentence: *“The biggest differences between us and the urban and suburban churches are...”*
- Respond to this statement: *“The rural/small town church is under-represented and under-resourced by the church at large.”* Do you agree, disagree, or have no opinion?
- Respond to this statement: *“There is a renewed interest among Christian leaders and institutions in the rural/small town church.”* Do you agree, disagree, or have no opinion?
- Consider the following list of rural/small town church assets and opportunities and compare them to your church. Rate them on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not relevant at all” and 5 being “very common and relevant.”
  - Sense of family and relational priority
  - Cooperation between local congregations
  - Cooperation between Churches and local Community Organizations
  - High visibility in the community
  - Perception of value, seen as a resource by the community
  - Deep commitment and loyalty to denominational roots
  - Heightened awareness and quick response to needs in the community
  - New opportunities to reach immigrants/nearby ethnic population
- Consider the following list of rural/small town church issues and challenges and compare them to your church. Rate them on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not relevant at all” and 5 being “very common and relevant.”
  - Lack of finances
  - Lack of resources, other than finances (i.e. volunteers, facilities)
  - Absence of children, youth, and families
  - Recruitment and retention of qualified Pastoral leadership
  - Demands placed on Pastoral staff exceeding ability to respond
  - Real or perceived restrictions on growth, a lack of momentum
  - Constant turnover in attendees
  - Declining attendance
  - Resistance to change, lack of acceptance regarding newcomers
  - Declining spiritual interest in the surrounding community

- How can a Local Church take advantage of assets/opportunities inherent in a rural/small town context?
- In what ways is a Local Church uniquely positioned and equipped to address the issues and challenges inherent in a rural/small town context?
- Finish this sentence: *“The greatest contribution the Rural/small town church has to make to the larger Body of Christ is...”*
- Would the following initiatives by the larger Body of Christ be effective in assisting rural/small town Churches? Rate them on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not effective” and 5 being “very effective”
  - Increased emphasis on rural/small town ministry by denominations, academic institutions, and national church networks and parachurch organization.
  - Organization of low-cost regional conferences with relevant topics and speakers experienced in rural/small town ministry.
  - Establishment of regional networks that create access to resources (curriculum, guest speakers, outreach and missions resources, etc.), collaboration, and encouragement.
  - Focus by academic institutions on the issues and opportunities of rural/small town ministry and appropriate methods of publication and communication.
  - Methods of education, training, and preparation for Pastors that include a focus on rural/small town ministry and avoid the typical economic burden associated with many schools.
  - Case studies of creative solutions and models applicable to rural/small town ministry
- Finish this sentence: *“The greatest contribution the larger Body of Christ could make to my ministry is...”*