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Posts



Ten Challenges to Rural Church Revitalization

🕒 March 22, 2019 👤 Rob Paul 💬 1 Comment

NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles addressing revitalization in the rural church.

Rural church revitalization is challenging work. Regardless of your setting, moving a church from stuck or struggling to soaring is difficult. It often takes years just to convince the membership that something needs to change. This is true for churches in urban centers. It is true for suburban and smaller town churches. And it is true for what we affectionately call "country churches."

Here are ten challenges to rural church revitalization. Some are unique to rural churches. Others are not. Some are daunting. But



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each of them can be and must be overcome for the rural church to experience revitalization.

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1. Resilience

As I wrote in this article, rural churches can be slow to die. And while this seems like a positive, it can give the members false hope. They may not recognize or be willing to admit that something needs to change. And it may take the pastor several years to convince them.

2. Pastoral Tenure

Many declining rural churches have historically called younger pastors without much experience or seasoned veteran pastors who are nearing retirement. I was told by a search committee early in my ministry, "We are at our best as a church when we have a young pastor on his way up." What they meant by that was someone who will lead us for three to five years and then move on to a larger church. If that church is stuck or struggling, three to five years is barely enough time to convince the church of the need for revitalization, let alone lead them to experience it.

3. Chaplaincy Mindset

This is the idea that the best thing a pastor can do for a struggling rural church is to love them while they die. But I am convinced that God has a more noble purpose for his church than this.

4. Location

Rural churches are by definition located in the country. They are often found in out-of-the-way places. Some are located at the end of a road. In other words, you have to be going there to get there. No one just drives by. Certainly, this is a challenge. But it can and must be overcome.

5. Population Shifts

We know that population shift is an issue for urban churches. Over time the neighborhood has changed. It is also an issue for many rural churches. A generation ago, the homes within three miles of the church building were owner occupied, single-family dwellings. Some farmed the land around their homes. Others worked in the nearest towns. The families of the community had lots of children and much in common. But those children went off to college and never came back. The jobs in town moved away, too.

6. Cultural Context

Because of the population shift the cultural context has changed. The people around the church do not look like the people inside of the church. They don't act like the people inside of the church. They don't think like the people inside of the church. Churches in this setting must learn to think like cross-cultural missionaries. Because that's what they are.

7. Misunderstanding Success

When I went to my first church, a rural family-chapel in south Mississippi, success was measured by growth. Attendance growth. Baptismal growth. Membership growth. You get the picture. Reaching our community took effort, but it was relatively easy. Most of the people were related to church members. They had much in common. We invited them, and they came. During my three-year tenure we grew from 60 in weekly attendance to 110. That was success. And I am not saying that same level of success is not possible today. I am just not sure it is probable. Especially not in three years (see points 1-6 above).

8. Underestimating Potential

I have heard Mark Clifton say on many occasions, "Most people overestimate what they can accomplish in a day. And underestimate what they can accomplish in ten years." That is probably not an exact quote. But you get the idea. The address of a rural church is not an accident any more than the address of an in-town church is an accident. God has placed the church in its location for a reason. God has also placed the members of the church in the body according to his design (See 1 Corinthians 13). And he has placed the people around the church for a reason. Don't underestimate the potential. Don't underestimate the power of the gospel!

9. Breaking the Family Code

The members of my first church were mostly related. Honestly. We had some who were double-first cousins. Brothers and sisters from one family married sisters and brothers from another family. Visitors who were not related often felt like they were crashing a family reunion. And so the church had to be intentional about welcoming them. Breaking the family code is a challenge. But it is not impossible.

10. The Church Name

As Thom Rainer pointed out in this post, new churches today have cool names. Life Church. Mosaic Church. Vertical Church. Summit Church. On the other hand, many rural churches have ancient names that may sound confusing to people who are not already part

of the church culture. Antioch Church (unless Antioch is the name of your town). Mt. Moriah Church. And my personal favorite. Any church name that includes a number other than first. As in New Harmony Baptist Church No. 3. Now, I am not suggesting that these names need to change. After all, I am advocating for longer pastoral tenure! But these names can present a challenge.

Overcoming the Challenges

The North American Mission Board Replant Team has identified four actions that replanting pastors must take in order to be successful. Preach. Pray. Love. And stay. In a future post I will address each of these in the context of rural church revitalization.

Rob Paul is a church revitalization strategist with over three decades of experience serving established Southern Baptist churches in pastoral ministry. He has a passion for encouraging and equipping established churches to experience revival and revitalization by God's grace and for His glory. To find out more about Rob Paul Ministries or to financially support the work of church revitalization, visit <https://robpaul.net>

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1 thought on "Ten Challenges to Rural Church Revitalization"



Danny Risinger says:

August 22, 2019 at 1:20 pm

I was excited to find this article and your web page. I have recently started working toward my PhD in Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth with my dissertation dedicated to the revitalization of the rural church. After 40 years of serving as pastor of small community and rural churches I have finally come to the realization that my calling and passion is for the