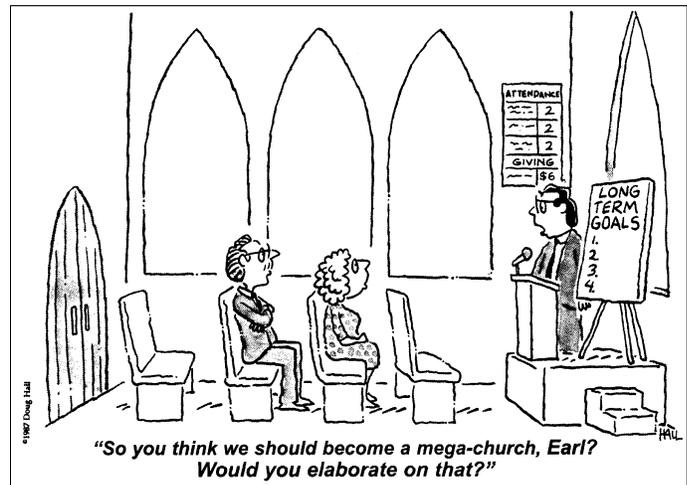


Church Growth in the Small Town

by Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director

Our English language is full of oxymorons, like: found missing, resident alien, same difference, definite maybe, sanitary landfill, and working vacation. To some, "small-town church growth" sounds like an oxymoron. With only one stoplight and precious few residents, can the small-town church actually grow? It can, and it has in many contexts. Perhaps what follows will trigger something that might be implemented in your small-town church.



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COMPARING TO URBAN

Church growth methods that are effective in the city might not be effective, workable, or even appropriate, in town and country settings. For instance: To be able to maintain a seeker service week in and week out, there must be a considerable population to draw from. A service targeting seekers in a town of 2,000 isn't likely to have many attendees. Plus, the ability to be anonymous is considered a crucial component—an impossibility in town and country areas.

Offering a contemporary service in hopes of attracting people may actually lead to church decline. There just aren't enough people in many towns and churches to maintain a contemporary service—or a traditional service, for that matter. This is quite a contrast to urban areas, where offering separate services for different music tastes might contribute to church growth. Furthermore, the rural culture may not be as responsive to a contemporary worship style, or the church may not have the resources (finances or people) to pull it off. Try to put together a worship team, and it may consist of two who are sharp, two flat, and one undecided!

So, when it comes to small-town church growth, one must be cautious about

applying the conventional wisdom found in many books and conferences.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE EVANGELISTIC SMALL-TOWN CHURCHES

I'm no church growth expert, but for the past 12 years I have been an observer as I've traveled all across the country. I'd like to share characteristics of effective evangelistic town and country churches that I've observed.

A sense of urgency. In many communities, rural people tend to think most everyone is a Christian. Or, if not, they think the church has been in the community long enough, and if people want to be saved they know the church is there—they're welcome to attend any time. They don't feel a sense of urgency to become proactive in evangelism.

What can be done to help overcome this lack of urgency? One suggestion is to compile statistics to show the need. Do a little homework to find how many are unchurched in *your* community. Don't just quote generic statistics for the country. If you do, your church people will inevitably think their community is an exception.

One of the advantages of small-town intimacy is that you know most everyone who goes to church and who doesn't, who's

likely a believer and who isn't. Unlike in a city like Chicago, in a small town you can go through the phone book and highlight people who are unchurched or in churches that do not proclaim a clear gospel. Then, add up this list and determine what percentage in your community are likely unsaved. I can virtually guarantee that your congregation will be shocked.

The unsaved are out there! This will open your congregation's eyes. It will help give them a sense of urgency for evangelism in your community.

Credibility. In urban areas, one could potentially be effective in evangelism without having a credible life. You could steal from your employer during the day, but lead someone to Christ through your church's Evangelism Explosion program that night. You could cuss out your fellow worker on the job, but be a youth leader who is effectively reaching teens. You could have a shabby reputation with your next-door neighbors, but be a counselor at a big evangelistic crusade.

Why? Because you are evangelizing people you don't know or aren't with all week long. They have no idea how you live your life. Contrast this to the small-town environment, where it's almost impossible to lead a double life. I know of a megachurch pastor whose marriage was in shambles for years, but the congregation didn't know it. In fact, his wife almost never attended church and they didn't know it. Yet, he is one of the most successful evangelistic pastors I know. This could never happen in a small town. If my wife missed church even once, scads of people asked where she was!

Without credibility, it isn't too likely that one can be effective at evangelism in a small town. Two kinds of credibility are needed: personal and corporate.

You can't cheat your neighbor, not pay your bills, share juicy gossip over a cup of coffee,

or tell off-color jokes to someone on the street, and then be successful in sharing the Lord with those same people later in the week as you work cattle with them. Personal credibility is essential.

Among rural people, one's entire personal history is known: conduct, values, past sins (going all the way back to one's teen years!), marriage relationship, family life, financial dealings—it's all an open book. And if one's book doesn't make for the kind of reading that enhances credibility, then one's ability to be successful at evangelism is in question. Life in the small town is lived in a fishbowl. Nothing gets past anyone. There are few dark corners in which one can hide. To be an effective evangelist in a rural community, one must meet the strictest test of accountability.

What is true for individuals is also true for the church. The most effective evangelistic church will be a healthy church—health being what makes a church credible. No evangelism endeavors in a rural community will likely be effective if the church is not healthy. Again, this is because of social intimacy. If one is talking to someone about Christ and they're thinking, *You attend First Church down the street. I've heard all about the kinds of things that happen in that church.*, they'll likely conclude that they want no part of it!

How can this hindrance be overcome? I can hear a small-town resident saying: "What hope is there for me? When I was in sixth grade, I stole candy from the local store. I got caught and the newspaper put it on the front page. Even though I was 12 when it happened and I'm 36 now, everyone in town remembers what I did. I want to be used of God to reach people for Christ, but how can I?"

Or someone might say, "I blew it back during those tough years on the farm. I was going bankrupt and hid some assets from my creditor so that I'd have something to start over with. I got caught and everyone

knows it. My reputation is shot. I can never live it down. I want to be successful in evangelism, but how can I?"

Or, "What you're telling me I have to do is absolutely impossible. No matter how hard I try, sooner or later I'm going to sin. A bad word is going to slip out of my mouth, or I'm going to laugh at an off-color joke, or I'm going to say a cross word to my wife in public."

Sooner or later, it seems that every person and every church takes their turn at messing up. And, in a small town, everyone knows it. If not messing up is a prerequisite for effective evangelism, then no one in town and country areas will be able to do it. How can one maintain credibility in a small town?

One suggestion: Regularly lead your church in individual and corporate repentance. This is a long-forgotten ministry in many local churches.

Start with a prayer time on Sunday morning. Follow the example of many of the prayers of the Bible, many of which consist of the spiritual leader bringing the sins of the people before God. The whole Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 centered around corporate confession. Many leaders, like Daniel and Nehemiah, led their people in prayers of confession.

Many Sundays, during prayer time, as pastor I confessed the sins of the people before God. Not private sins that I learned from counseling appointments, but general sins that I knew our people had committed. (Be careful—if you've done marriage counseling that week, don't confess their sins on Sunday!) I would say things like, "Since last week some of us have yelled at our children when we shouldn't have, cheated on a test in school, hidden income from the IRS, read magazines or looked at television programs that are an affront to You, gossiped against our neighbor..." Pray thoughtfully and with great care. Don't say, "*In the cafe* we have gossiped," because

this might be a slam against the cafe owners.

I would confess these sins corporately before God. Then, if anything happened in the nation during the week, I confessed that: "Lord, Congress passed an abortion law this week that must grieve you terribly..."

Leading your congregation in corporate repentance is not only a regular reminder to them of the importance of confession and repentance, it also has a cleansing benefit. Confessing sins has a way of encouraging your people not to commit the same sins next week. Often I would say this as part of my confession prayer: "Lord, we acknowledge this is wrong. Help us not to repeat these sins this week."

My experience has been that corporate confession not only helped the church become healthy, it also provided a model for individual confession. It showed the need for making things right with God and with people.

Maybe it was someone's comments that caused a congregational meeting to blow up. All it takes is one nasty congregational meeting and, when word gets out into the community, the church's witness can be damaged for years. But, if dealt with properly, the community will hear about that too. They will say, "People aren't perfect at First Church, but when wrong things happen there they deal with them."

Just because we have sinned—as individuals or as a church—doesn't mean our credibility is lost forever. What we need to understand is that humble repentance is a powerful witness. It's the kind of news that gets around town too! It restores credibility.

Multi-faceted. It is my observation that churches which are effective at evangelism take a multi-faceted approach. They don't look for one formula, one program, or one method as their solution. They don't put all their eggs in one basket. They approach it

from a number of angles—sometimes dozens of them.

They look for obstacles that need to be removed which are making evangelism difficult. An example: a church constitution that requires a form of decision making that creates a lot of open conflict and harms the church's reputation.

They look for building improvements that are needed that will make the church more attractive for newcomers: painting that needs to be done, creating a pleasant foyer, remodeling the nursery, upgrading the sound system, installing new bathroom fixtures.

They look for church ministries that need improving—the music, the children's programs.

They create lots of opportunities for their people to be involved in evangelism: show movies on Main Street, host a children's rodeo, a Vacation Bible School, a Thanksgiving dinner, etc.

They repeatedly suggest many ways that their congregation can be involved with evangelism on a personal level: make it a point to go hunting with an unbeliever, invite neighbors into your home, head up a Welcome Wagon program for newcomers, volunteer in the public school, etc.

THE PASTOR'S MANY HATS

As the small-town church becomes more intentional about growth, the pastor has many important hats to wear.

Cheerleader. Encourage, share success stories, and affirm effective evangelism endeavors. Write about them in the church newsletter, congratulate in the church bulletin, talk about them from the pulpit.

Equipper. Train for evangelism. Don't assume your people know how to evangelize or communicate the gospel.

Mentor. Show by example. It's hard to imagine church people developing relationships with unbelievers if their pastor isn't. Invite neighbors over. Work cattle with ranchers. Hop on a combine with farmers. Go to auctions. Go hunting. Become a volunteer ambulance driver. Spend time in the cafe. Attend ball games...and sit with unbelievers.

Orchestrator. Provide multiple evangelism opportunities: a released time class at the local grade school, a concert in the park, a Valentine's banquet, etc.

Nudger. Keep nudging (not shoving!) your people to do it.

Pray-er. Pray about evangelism endeavors in the pulpit. Pray in other contexts.

Informer. Remind your people about how many newcomers move into town. When I was pastoring in a town of 500, the local city utilities man attended our church. He once told me he had hooked up about a dozen electric meters for newcomers in our town in the past three months. I was shocked. I passed the news on to our evangelism committee. They didn't believe me, until I produced real names. Our committee went to work with a plan for welcoming newcomers to town and befriending them. A number of them became a part of our church.

Evaluator. Always look for ways to improve the things you are presently doing to encourage church growth and for new ways to help the church grow.