

Four Core Values of Small-Town Ministry

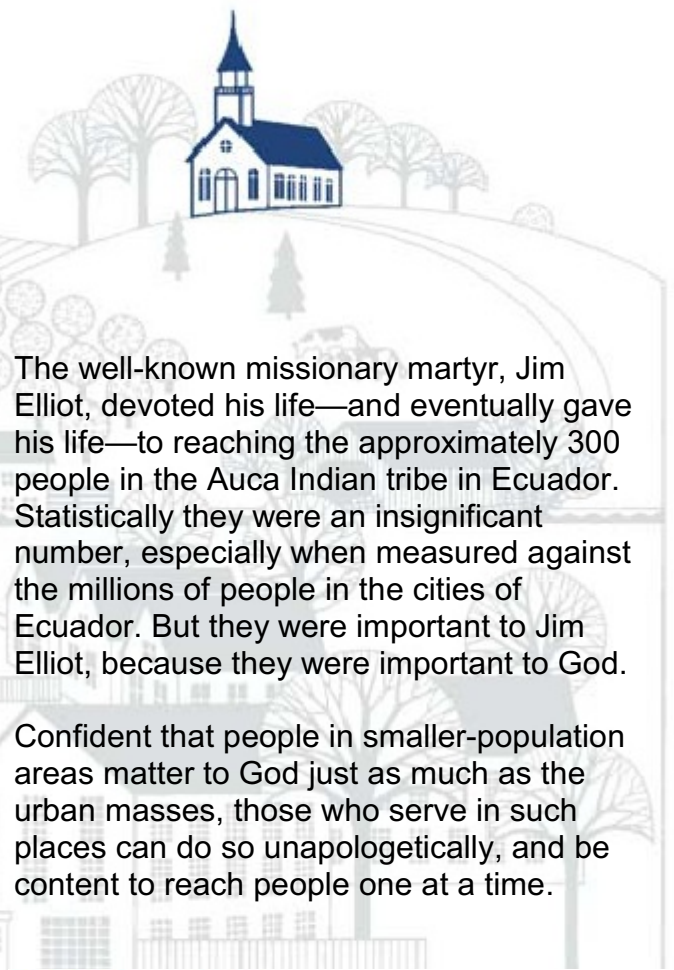
When the going gets tough, these values will keep you going

by Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director

In every ministry there are times of questioning: Should I keep doing what I'm doing or do something completely different with my life? Should I keep doing the same thing, but in a different setting?

It's possible to elevate these questions to another level: Does God want me to keep doing what I'm doing? Is there something different I could do, or a different place I could do it, that would have greater impact for Him?

When these kinds of questions surface (which they do about twice a week in small-town ministry!), a few core values might make a difference.



The well-known missionary martyr, Jim Elliot, devoted his life—and eventually gave his life—to reaching the approximately 300 people in the Auca Indian tribe in Ecuador. Statistically they were an insignificant number, especially when measured against the millions of people in the cities of Ecuador. But they were important to Jim Elliot, because they were important to God.

Confident that people in smaller-population areas matter to God just as much as the urban masses, those who serve in such places can do so unapologetically, and be content to reach people one at a time.

Value #1

Individuals are important to God.

Christ's parable of the lost sheep communicates this value loud and clear. To what great length the Shepherd went to find that one lost sheep!

God doesn't view this world in terms of masses; He views this world one person at a time. The God of the universe cares about that one lost person out in the middle of nowhere, whether "nowhere" is a tribal village in Irian Jaya or a small town in our own country—the "remotest part of the earth" of Acts 1:8. The Navigators' slogan, *Reaching the world one person at a time*, should not be lost in our day of emphasis on the masses.

Value #2

Isolated contexts are not limiting to God.

Sometimes we are prone to think God's hands are pretty well tied in lower-population areas—that size limits what God can do. But even in small places large numbers can be reached. It depends not so much on numbers, but on God's sovereignty.

In Matthew 9:35-36 we read that when Christ taught in towns and villages, "crowds" gathered. Similarly, though John the Baptist's pulpit was out in the wilderness, multitudes flocked to hear him.

Time and time again it has been proven that good-sized churches can be found in isolated contexts. One church, in Oshoto, Wyoming, grew to an average attendance of

seventy, though only 131 people lived within a ten-mile radius of the church!

The *Religion Report* told of a city in Russia that missionaries went to. They worked hard, but with little response. An elderly woman in a nearby village invited the missionaries to come and preach in her town. The entire village of eighty showed up, and at the end of the service all eighty responded to the invitation!¹

Value #3

Sphere of influence is more important than population.

Living in a larger context does not guarantee larger influence. A million people living in close proximity does not mean a million people will be influenced for Christ. In fact, a missionary would be fortunate to influence one thousand of those million for Christ. All of us are limited in how many we can influence. What's the difference, then, if we touch one thousand lives in a city of a million or one thousand lives in a smaller town of, say, two thousand?

Furthermore, it could be argued that because a small town is a more personal setting, the pastor or missionary in that town—known by everyone in town—will have more influence among the thousand lives he touches than he would among a thousand lives in a larger context. In a small town, when the pastor is in the local cafe he is having influence, while in a large city no one in the cafe likely even knows him or knows he's a pastor. One may actually touch more lives, and have greater influence, in the small town than in the city.

Value #4

The ability to see potential is a key to success.

Looking through God's eyes, it is possible to see potential where many can see none. One pastor might look over a community and see no potential there. Another might look at the same community and be excited about what he sees could happen in that place.

Sam Walton is an example of someone who saw potential when most could see none. He wrote, "Our key strategy . . . was simply to put . . . discount stores into little one-horse towns which everybody else was ignoring. . . . In those days, K-mart wasn't going to towns below 50,000. . . . We knew our formula was working even in towns smaller than 5,000 people, and there were plenty of those towns out there for us to expand into. When people want to simplify the Wal-Mart story, that's usually how they sum up the secret of our success: 'Oh, they went into small towns when nobody else would.' . . . While the big guys were leap-frogging from large city to large city . . . they left huge pockets of business out there for us."²

If Sam Walton could see potential for Wal-Mart in small towns, then can we not see potential for the churches we pastor in small towns?

1. *National & International Religion Report*, February 20, 1995.

2. Sam Walton, *Made in America—My Story*, pp. 109-110.