

Seeing Potential Out in the Corn Fields

by Phil Somers

*The first time I drove out to Phil Somers' country church, somewhere along the way I started to wonder if I could get there from here. After traveling a narrow road that is barely asphalted (dodging potholes like you're playing a computer game), I ended up at a T, with only a farm road to turn on to. About a half-mile down the farm road it merged into a county road connecting two nearby towns—Deer Creek (pop. 630) and Mackinaw (pop. 1350). At that intersection sits New Castle Bible Church. Can you believe that Phil sees this as a **strategic** location? Read on, as he tells about it in his own words . . .*
Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director



New Castle Bible Church today

When my wife, Ardie, and I candidated at NCBC, the first thing we saw was an older building with four different roof lines, a gravel parking lot, and fields on all sides. I wondered, *What could God possibly do here?*

Then we met the people—a wonderful, cohesive family. Incredibly, I came away from that weekend feeling there was more potential there than any place I had seen in my whole life. I went home and thought night and day about what God might do in that church, though I didn't know if I would ever see it again.

Many years after moving here, I still see more potential here than any other place on earth. There may be places with more potential, but I don't know where they are, and I don't have to know. I just need to see potential in my church.

When we moved here I got a plat map of our area. I copied it so that NCBC was at the center of the paper. I asked God to help me see this church as the center of my world. I wanted Him to help me see it as a hub of what could be. I began to draw concentric circles, asking: How many people live within five miles of our church? Ten? Who are they? How will we reach them?

I began to see that being a country church was an advantage. The fact that we were not linked with any one town meant we could reach out to many surrounding towns. Before long I saw our church as a regional center. With this vision, my mind began to go in many directions.

As I think about what has happened since that candidating weekend, it boils down to a few tips that might be helpful for you in your rural setting . . .

Check out your view of God. What we think God sees could happen in our country church will depend on how we see our God. If our view of God is limited, then our view of what God can do through our country church will be limited.

Looking through God's eyes, what do you see in your country church? Nehemiah looked at a pile of rubble and saw a city. Paul told Titus that the Cretans were liars, evil brutes and lazy gluttons, but he was to look at those guys and see church leaders. What do you see in your setting?

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do with my country church.

Ask stretching questions. Can anyone possibly get from here to the ends of the earth to serve God?

Is it possible that our church could push the borders out and impact outlying towns that are within driving distance?

Could our church have a program that would draw in young mothers and introduce them to the Lord?

Could our church have a ministry to retirees that meets their needs? What would it take for these same retirees to become surrogate grandparents for some troubled children who have recently been attending?

What ministry improvements and changes could we make if we remodeled? Built new? Took a bulldozer to part of the property?

Could we plant a church in a neighboring community? Or help revive a dwindling struggling church in another town?

At NCBC we've addressed all these questions and many more. The size or location of our church has never been a determining factor as we've sought to get things done.

Start writing. In your dreams, what would you like your church to be? To do? What niches would you like it to fill in your community?

Take a piece of paper and start writing. Write on it the ideal Christian Education program for your church and community. Write on it the kind of youth ministry that

would be uniquely appropriate for teens in your area. Describe what your missions program would look like if God wrote the script for it. Explain everything God might do through the seniors in your congregation.

Pray. As you dream, do it on your knees. Pray that God will open your eyes to see your people, church and community as He sees them. Ask Him to help you see what they could be if He gets hold of them.

As you pray, write down your thoughts. Pray with your spouse and write down her thoughts. For awhile don't tell anyone else—just the two of you pray and dream.

Start to flesh out your ideas. Keep praying. Flesh

them out some more. Write a comprehensive word picture of what you believe your church could be and do.

In our case, pages and pages of vision were produced. Possibilities were shared with many of our people. Some of the more creative folks joined in the process. Most ideas were rewritten several times. Others came up with visionary thoughts that would never have crossed my mind. Some ideas were dropped (many ideas, actually). After awhile the leaders decided to meet together for two days to talk and pray through the vision.

We came up with twenty-seven different categories of vision, spanning nineteen pages. The numbers aren't important—you may come up with three categories or three hundred. What's key is that you are gaining an understanding of how God sees your country church, and what He could do through it.

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As you go through this whole process, never forget that the church is people. If our vision is just budgets and buildings, we're missing something. We need to ask: What kind of people should this church be producing? If someone attends our Sunday School for six months, what will they learn? If someone attends our Tuesday evening Bible study, what direction will they grow?

At the County Fair, livestock are judged. People bring their sheep and stand them next to each other's. They've been cleaned, brushed, trimmed and fussed over. Then judges come by with clipboards, detailing all sorts of criteria. They look over each sheep and decide which one gets the blue ribbon.

This is hypothetical—and I'm glad it is—but what if pastors had to stand their sheep next to each other in a row and let the Judge of the earth examine what they have worked to produce? Are there churches that are producing more presentable believers than other churches? What does our church need to be and do to produce these kinds of people?

By God's grace, He's brought a lot of our dreams to pass. Some of it happened quicker than I thought it would.

Our leaders joined us in praying about the ideas floating around. Some in the church even stepped forward as they saw areas of ministry that fit their gifts.

Parts of the vision are coming to pass slower than expected, but we'll keep working at it. We've come to realize that vision often needs to be tweaked, or set aside as no longer appropriate. Flexibility is a key word in the process.

On one of my first days on the job at NCBC, I went down into the basement of the church and dug up old records, board minutes, bulletins, etc. I read every word on them.

One thing I discovered was that many years ago the church family had wrestled very hard with the possibility of moving into town. After some deliberation, they decided to stay where they were. I can't tell you how glad I am they did.