

REFOCUSING THE VISION OF THE

RURAL/SMALL TOWN CHURCH

A PROJECT REPORT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

WAYNE WENDELL BOYER

WINEBRENNER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BA	Bachelor of Arts
BSN	Bachelor of Nursing Science
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CGGC	Churches of God, General Conference
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
D/O	Disorder
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
JR	Junior
MBA	Master of Business Administration
M.Div.	Master of Divinity
MUGS	Men United in God's Service
NAE	National Association of Evangelicals
NLT	New Living Translation
NY	New York
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PA	Pennsylvania
RN	Registered Nurse
UPMC	University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
WPFC	Western Pennsylvania Family Center
WTS	Winebrenner Theological Seminary

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I would like to thank Winebrenner Theological Seminary for the opportunity to be stretched by a project such as this and to President Dr. David Draper for challenging me to do so. My gratitude also extends to The Churches of God, General Conference that has graciously allowed me to work on this project in conjunction with my position as the Executive Director. This venture would have been impossible without the unreserved willingness to be vulnerable on the part of the Clinton Church of God, the Breakneck Church of God, and their pastor, Joseph Wingrove.

It has been my privilege to work with the Doctor of Ministry Director, Dr. Leslie Lightner; Project Chairperson, Dr. Gary Staats; External Reader, Dr. Gary Bair; and Writing Stylist, Pastor Jim Davison. I have appreciated their expertise, encouragement, and especially their patience in helping me bring this project to completion.

Thanks also to my “fan club” that has rallied behind me in continual encouragement. This “club” is led by my always supportive wife, Kay, my family, the office staff at the General Conference Headquarters, and the faculty and staff at the seminary.

But most of all, I want to acknowledge my necessary reliance on the Lord Jesus Christ, that Great Shepherd of the sheep, Who loves the church to the extent of laying down His life for it.

## ABSTRACT

This project attempts to discover why some rural/small town congregations grow when the overwhelming expectations from demographics and experience call for decline. This study examines the circuit of the Breakneck Church of God and the Clinton Church of God in western Pennsylvania, that is pastored by Joseph Wingrove. Data were gathered from questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, examination of written records, observation of worship services, and other special events.

This project concludes that the practical carrying out of the command of “Love your neighbor as yourself” by this type of churches in their communities has lowered the natural barriers that often surround these churches. In contrast they have produced an attractive, inviting atmosphere that serves as a magnet in drawing the people of their aging, numerically declining neighborhoods to their churches and to an eventual relationship with Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

**Context of the Problem**

It was in the fall of 1968 that I headed for the morning chapel service at Bethel Theological Seminary in Arden Hills, Minnesota. There was little anticipation in my mind that this would be a chapel that God would use to affect my life so greatly. Our speaker was a pastor who had spent forty years ministering in a country church. He shared the joys and sorrows of his ministry and then concluded with this challenge: “What is there about you that you would not consider serving God in the pastorate of a rural church?”

Like most of my peers in their last year of seminary studies, I had my sights set on the “big time!” I anticipated pastoring one of the large churches around the country and, in fact, had already been approached with “feelers” from some of them. Pastoring one of these churches would *make* my career. It would give me a platform from which to speak and write. Yet, still echoing in the back of my mind was the question, “What is there about you that you would not consider serving God in the pastorate of a rural church?” After a time of soul searching, it was time to reaffirm my call ... *a servant of THE SERVANT!* Servants do not decide or direct, servants obey. *Anywhere, Lord!*

God took me at my word and as I prepared for graduation and beyond there were two calls to be considered. One was from a large church in a metropolitan area, pastored

by a well-known pastor who was drawing close to retirement. I would be his assistant and *heir apparent* to become the next pastor. The chairman of the pulpit committee was well known in evangelical circles and a close personal friend of none other than Billy Graham! He was a businessman who was used to getting what he wanted. He applied heavy pressure and spared no expense to get my “yes.” The other call was from a little white framed country church in the middle of the corn fields of central Illinois, seven miles from the nearest town, which itself had only a population of about 700. The pulpit committee was made up of farmers who did business by the post office rather than by the telephone company. After much prayer and reflection, I chose the latter.

I remember walking around the property of my new pastorate. There was a large swing set with all of the seats rotted off. A tennis court with a rusted fence and cracked concrete gave witness to what had once been the center of the community, but was so no longer. The leadership of the church was discouraged and admitted that if they did not begin growing, it was only a matter of time until they would have to close their doors. But grow, we did! In twenty-three months the church grew from an average of forty to an average of nearly three times that number. People were coming to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and others were recommitting their lives to His service. Mission giving rose to nearly \$5,000 per year from a base of nothing! On Easter Sunday, the sanctuary was packed to capacity, all of the chairs the church owned were set up in the aisles and every place possible and still people were standing around the walls. Soon the lights were back up on the tennis courts and the swings repaired. People were again stopping by to use the grounds for family outings. Here was a church breaking out of all the traditional models of rural/small town churches and actually thriving in ministry!

In 1994, I was called to become the Director of the Churches of God, General Conference (CGGC). As I studied the CGGC, I discovered that fully one-third of our churches were located in rural areas or in small towns and averaged thirty-five or less in Sunday morning worship attendance. While the continuing decline in attendance of these churches was not as steep as in many of the others, the overall attendance in these smaller churches was in decline and not a few of them were in a desperation mode to merely keep their doors open.

It was in that year that I was invited to participate in a study group sponsored by Winebrenner Theological Seminary regarding the potential of beginning a Doctor of Ministry program there. At that, and at subsequent meetings, I urged that somehow in conjunction with this concept we foster some studies on the transformation of the small rural/small town churches in the CGGC.

Now, as I entered this program in my sixties, I have done so for four primary reasons: (1) my personal commitment to continued growth in my own life; (2) to set an example to my peers to continue growing as well; (3) to place my personal endorsement on the ministry of WTS; and (4) to carry out the study of the rural/small town church God has placed upon my heart and to which I had spoken nearly a decade earlier.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Times have not been kind to the rural/small town churches that used to be the backbone of their communities and the glue which held everything together in their areas.

The initial problem was economic. With the coming of larger machinery doing tasks faster and more efficiently, fewer and fewer farmers were needed to farm the same

amount of land. The small, family farm was forced out of business as large farms became the only profitable ones. Family after family was forced to leave their community and relocate in the areas of larger population in order to find work. A drive through the area with one who has lived there over the years never fails to yield a litany of stories of families who used to live there and of houses remaining only in memory and an occasional standing barn or foundation. But the people were gone.

Coupled closely with that struggle was the similar problem of many of our CGGC churches being located in small, mining communities. Technological advances wrecked havoc there as well with machinery doing more and more of the work with fewer and fewer employees needed. Add to this the growing clean air environmental concerns bringing subsequent legislation that forced the closing of many of the coal mines, devastating the population of these communities as well.

Gas stations and grocery stores closed, schools consolidated, leaving in most cases only the lonely church building as a reminder of days gone by. In order to continue to be viable economically, many of the churches became “family” churches. The retirees did not need to relocate and in many cases could not afford to do so. They stayed in their homes as their children moved to the cities. But, the family often kept their membership in the church to keep the numbers somewhat artificially inflated so that their parents would not be left without a church. The unanticipated result was that this process tended to lead to an exclusiveness that a “family” church could not help but produce. New people were needed, mostly for their money and work to keep the church going. Yet, when visitors came, they were often considered a threat to the family-run church and

effectively, though certainly not intentionally, excluded from any leadership positions within the church body.

The communities were, by in large, not completely vacated. While many churches in these areas did close their doors, there was usually more than enough remaining population to sustain a church in the area. The underlying problem was that subtly the stress and vision of the church slowly yet continually moved away from the witness to the world and the worship of God to the tunnel vision of survival. The people remembered the good days and many subconsciously felt that if they could just bring back 1959 again, they could survive! Of course 1959 would not come back and meanwhile attendance in most of these churches has continued to decline. Many times an endowment from a will would ensure enough capital to keep the church doors open for decades, yet for many of these churches, the only reason the church existed was *to exist!* The problem is that while some rural/small town churches are thriving and growing despite the fact that the overwhelming expectations from demographics and experience call for decline, the bulk of the rural/small town congregations are striving to simply exist.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover what has been effective in turning the rural/small town churches from existence to life, from a mere vegetative state of survival to an effective, healthy, thriving ministry.

As I examine the CGGC, I have discovered that there are churches that have actually countered the normal trend and are thriving despite the economic and demographic challenges they face. This study looks into the life of two of these churches

as well as into their communities to discover what factors have caused these changes and to what degree each of them has effected the change.

The role of leadership in these situations also merits close attention. The vision, leadership, and reliability of the pastor are of special importance and are certainly worthy of study. It is also important to understand that the background, people skills, and personality of the pastor have had a great influence on the church.

In rural/small town church studies, there is an anomaly of what I call the *Ginghamsburg Model*. About 20 years ago, a United Methodist Church in the small community of Ginghamsburg, just north of Dayton, Ohio, called Mike Slaughter to become its pastor. Mike was a unique man of vision with superior organizational skills. The church grew to *mega*-church size, left their community, and relocated to the edge of Interstate Highway 75. The church currently ministers to people all over the Dayton metropolitan area. To my knowledge there is no longer a church in Ginghamsburg. To replicate this in other churches would prove impossible without the exceptional skills of such a pastor.

For that reason, I did not include that popular philosophy in this project. Rather, the results of this study have produced a basic strategy that is not locally specific. I believe this is a strategy that can be used generically by rural/small town churches across our country to break the cycle of decline to demise with a new cycle of healthy thriving churches.

### **Research Methodology**

In order to discover the results I sought, I have examined two rural/small town churches that appear healthy and are growing numerically. These churches are connected

to each other as part of a circuit. I have studied the history of the churches and the area. This study has included the economy and demographics of the region. It has also included the quantitative aspect of worship attendance figures for the past several years as well as the financial records. I recognize that numbers are not the only measure of church health but they are the most apparent and most easily recognizable.

I have looked at the structure of leadership in the church (official and unofficial), their facilities, and their finances. I studied their calendar year and significant programs. To gain the information I needed, I made one “in-depth” visit to each of the churches, interviewing the church leadership, older and younger members, and people in the community.

Suspecting that pastors play a crucial role in any church’s health, I did a more intense study of the pastor: his background, schooling, age and experience, length of ministry, and identification with the community or communities like it. I found factors that contributed his call to the church and sensed his heart’s passion for this particular ministry. I believed it would also be valuable to study the pastor’s philosophy of ministry . . . indeed it was!

Naturally, I examined change factors that coincided with a turn around toward health in these churches: what they actually were, how they came about, what obstacles had to be overcome, and what issues ensured their success. I found there was not a single factor that alone brought health to these churches, but a combination of these factors. How they relate to each other and the significance of that relationship has proven to be most important.

### Research Questions

My questions focused on discovering the factors that turned the churches from stagnating, declining congregations to healthy, growing ones. They were . . .

1. When did the change from declining attendance to growth take place and what circumstances were involved in the transition? Developing an annotated time-line proved helpful for each of the churches.
2. Given the fact that churches are not merely social institutions but intensely spiritual in nature, what things were done in the spiritual realm to infuse this new change? To the church itself: was there a prayer emphasis, a period of fasting, discipleship training, a time of personal introspection and revival? To those outside of the church: was there a renewed stress on evangelism, ministering to the physical, social, and moral needs of the community, programs to bridge the gap between the church and the world with encouragement like Friendship Sundays, special social affairs like picnics and community celebrations?
3. What attitudes on the part of the congregation needed to be confronted or encouraged? How was this done? Possible attitudes considered included fear, selfishness, exclusiveness, and the drive to control.
4. What church governmental structures were endorsed, dismantled, or altered in enabling the church to begin to grow? What was the make-up of the Administrative Council: how many members, who, tenure, and relationships? It was valuable to study the board minutes to discover how “hands on” the board was and what kind of items dominated their meetings.

5. In most of the smaller churches, the power structures are entrenched and immovable. Anticipating this to be the case, I sought to discover how were these changed: Desperation? Death? Weariness? Trust of the pastor by members of the leading families? Relocation of family members? Exits, either from anger or relief that it was no longer their responsibility to keep the church open?
6. What role did the pastor's personality or charisma play in the change?
  - His relational skills?
  - His preaching skills?
  - His pastoring skills?
  - His own background and experiences?
  - His age?
  - His ability to live on limited income?
  - The longevity of his pastorate? (At what point in his ministry did the growth begin?)
  - Which of the above traits were the most important to his ministry at the church and bringing about the change in the congregation?
7. What was the growing curve of finances compared to the growing curve of attendance? Was there a change in attitude regarding finances? Often the vision of looking beyond ourselves begins with the matter of finances. Did this play a part in the change of attitude in the church? Was it part of the cause or part of the result of this change?
8. What role, if any, did the church building and facilities have in the growth? Factors considered included seating, kitchen, parking, bathrooms, community

halls, picnic areas, and ball diamonds. Another aspect included the availability of use of the church facilities for community functions such as dinners, weddings, and funerals.

9. Were there community factors that contributed to the growth of the church such as new housing coming into the area or new businesses hiring as examples?
10. What effect did the growth of the church have on the community?
11. Was the church's connection with the community surrounding the church a factor in the growth of the church? What was the nature of these connections? Were these the "normal" ministries such as food banks and Christmas baskets? Were they more innovative and community specific such as athletic leagues, community choirs, marriage seminars, or grief seminars?
12. What were the roles of organizations such as men's and women's ministries, children's ministry, youth ministry, and music ministry in the church's growth?
13. What particular problems and advantages do circuit ministries present to healthy, growing churches? The popular thinking is that the goal of circuit churches is to become large enough to exit the circuit and become a self-standing church. The circuit I studied has decided that when the time comes to make that decision, they anticipate hiring an associate pastor to help with the ministry yet allowing them to remain a circuit. This unique mindset proved interesting as did the ensuing results.
14. As the church began to grow, what potential dangers did they see out there? What were the rocks that were beneath the surface that could potentially scuttle growth?
15. Were the factors God has used to produce growth in the rural/small church reproducible or are they unique to that situation?

16. What would be the long-term prognosis of the growth of the rural/small town church? How dependent is the church upon the person of the pastor? Is the growth of the church likely to continue after he leaves? What things were put in place to ensure that that would actually take place?

### **Significance of the Study**

I was walking toward my car in the parking lot after the dedication service of a new church building in southern Pennsylvania, when a woman approached me to thank me for the message I had just preached. She went on to tell me that she did not attend that particular church herself but had come to help them celebrate. Her church was on the other side of the ridge and had fallen on hard times. They were down to less than ten attendees, could not afford a pastor, and were barely able to keep the doors open and the lights on. She spoke with a depressed feeling, which I suspected reflected not only the church she attended but also the community in which they were located. Her question to me was, “Many of our members are older and unable to travel to other churches so closing down is not an option. Pastor Boyer, is there any hope for a church like ours?”

I would have to say that the significance of this study is to provide hope for people in this kind of situation. What, if anything, can be done to stop the downward spiral toward extinction of these rural/small town churches?

I envision that this project will most directly and immediately be used by leadership in the rural/small town churches themselves. I foresee meeting this need on two levels. First, and most importantly, there will be insights on the theological/philosophical aspects of the rural/small town church. Why should they exist at all? What can reasonably be expected of a ministry in that situation? What values must

be present to propel them to effectiveness? Secondly, what are the sociological insights that lead to practical suggestions regarding structure, program, and leadership paradigms that will be of use to these churches?

I anticipate this study will be of use to placement committees in the CGGC and in other denominations as they seek to connect the right pastor with the right rural/small town church situation. It will provide questions for them to ask and character traits of both the church and the potential pastor to be evaluated. My hope is that the result of this study will elevate the position of the rural/small town church pastor. Currently these pastors usually include short-term tenures by either the novice just out of seminary, a retiree holding on to supplement his retirement income, or the layperson from the community. The latter are often people with little or no training whose greatest asset is availability. I would like to see the qualifications raised to an intentional calling that could easily last a lifetime.

Finally, my prayer is that this project might assist the seminaries in training future pastors in their philosophy of education. Currently, size and growth of churches tend to be the only tacit measure of success or failure of the graduates in their ministry. This dramatically tilts the scales away from ministering in the rural/small town church. My prayer is that the results of this paper will echo the challenge I received that day in chapel those many years ago: “What is there about you that you would not consider serving God in the pastorate of a rural church?”

### Assumptions and Limitations

The topic, as important as it is, was an enormous venture to undertake. Having served in the pastorate during five decades, I have seen God work through circumstances and in spite of circumstances. A study of two churches from a circuit that seems to be doing the things that are producing growth and effective ministry can only pull back the curtain a bit in the grand scheme of things. Ultimately, while Paul and Apollos can plant and water—it is God that produces the increase or growth (I Cor. 3:6).

After all of the study, even to suggest that the conclusions that are reached will result in *one size fitting all* would seem ludicrous from the onset. Principles, examples, and illustrations do have their limitations in various contexts.

It would also appear that I am giving unusual weight to the factor of numeric growth. I agree that there are *unhealthy* ways to gain numeric growth in churches but healthy churches, like any living thing, do tend to grow. While the rural/small town churches' growth is not as meteorically significant as in the larger populated areas, growth is to be expected of healthy churches. The lack of such growth is actually a symptom of other possible problems within the small rural/small town church.

The time frame of eighteen months in which the study was done is only a *blip on the radar screen* when taken in perspective to the time line of each church's history. Due to the fact that the churches are located 250 miles from my office precluded spending a substantial time in each location, forfeiting the insights gained from general exposure that often prove to be highly revealing.

Being an outsider looking in is a potential double-edged sword. On the positive side, it enabled objectivity. Without primary vested interest in the church, the observation was done with little bias. On the negative side, it is much easier to miss things that one

who is involved would point to immediately as being important. The danger of missing things like this weighs heavily upon the writer.

There is also the factor of my position within the denomination. As the executive director, there was the potential of unconscious intimidation. Actually, I do not see myself as being intimidating nor does our polity lend itself to that, but I suspect the potential may have been there. More likely could have been the temptation for the church to seek to *look good* for the study. Human nature suggests smiling for the camera and objectivity can be difficult to achieve.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. *Administrative Council* is the title of the ruling body in the local church, in the local conference, and in the denomination itself. Council members are usually elected for a period of time followed by a period off the board. Because of the short supply of candidates, many of the rural/small town churches neglect term limits and these positions have a tendency to stagnate.
2. *CGGC* is the common abbreviation for Churches of God, General Conference. This is the denomination of which I am a part as are both of the churches studied.
3. *Circuits* are a uniting of two or more churches under a single pastor while continuing governance as individual churches.
4. *Leadership* in these churches is comprised of the formal (elected, appointed, named, etc.) and informal (actually leading but without title). The latter are commonly referred to in a negative way as the *church boss* or the *belle heifer*. Their influence is by definition usually negative but can be very positive. Many of

the rural/small town churches have been kept viable by the quiet unobtrusive influence of such people.

5. *Local Conference* is the body with direct oversight of the individual churches.

This is the place in our denomination that deals with ordinations, the appointment and removal of pastors, and the configuration of circuits. The CGGC is made up of eight of these conferences of various sizes.

6. *Rural/Small town church* is defined both by location and size. These churches

compose fully one third of the number of churches within the CGGC. The majority of these churches range in average worship attendance from ten to seventy-five.

7. *Surviving* is the condition of the church that exists to exist. There seems to be no motivation for ministry outside of keeping the doors open, the pastor paid, and the heat and lights on.

8. *Thriving* is the condition of the healthy church that exists to minister the love of Jesus Christ to a hurting world and to proclaim the gospel to those for whom Christ died.

9. *WTS* is the common abbreviation for Winebrenner Theological Seminary, the CGGC denominational primary training institution for our pastors. It is located in Findlay, Ohio.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter One: Introduction to the Project

Chapter Two: Biblical and Theological Foundations

Chapter Three: Literature and Other Sources

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Procedures

Chapter Five: Analysis of Data

Chapter Six: Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In other writings, Chapter One would often be referred to as the introduction.

Here is where the framework for the entire project is set out. The problem and solution are defined as is the methodology of the process. Questions to be answered are detailed and terms are defined. Assumptions and limitations of my dealing with the project are specifically stated and acknowledged. To understand the purpose of the project, Chapter One must be understood.

In Chapter Two, the obvious fact must be recognized that the church is first and foremost God's body. To grasp its uniqueness and purpose drives us back to God's word, the Bible. Many studies have been made and many programs developed for the church, yet without an understanding of the church's nature and purpose we are left groping for a foundation, a place to stand as we seek, like Archimedes, to "move the world." It is upon God's word that we have the foundation upon which our study will be based.

The nature and purpose of the church must be carried out in the frame of reference of this world. Chapter Three draws from the learning of scholars in the study of social relationships, of human thinking, of economy, and of history for example. These studies have helped us bridge the gap from what is to what should be.

Against this background Chapter Four details the research of the project itself. Here the reader will discover the materials from which my lessons are learned and my conclusions are reached. This chapter includes empirical data from observations, study, and interviews of those involved in the churches themselves.

Moving immediately from the research of Chapter Four is the analysis of the data in Chapter Five.

Finally, the conclusions reached and the suggestions coming out of these conclusions are included in Chapter Six. This chapter also includes recommendations that emerged from this project.

CHAPTER TWO  
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

**The Church**

The initial mention of the term “church” in scripture is spoken by our Lord as recorded in Matthew 16:17-18. The scene is in Caesarea Philippi and Peter had just responded to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” with the affirmation, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then confirmed his answer with this statement: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

The term “church” is ἐκκλησία that means “those called out from.” From the onset we are made aware that the church is not a creation of human will but it is of divine origin. Jesus promised that “I [emphasis mine] will build my church.” We are also taught that the church is not a creation spoken into existence by divine fiat but rather involves God’s activity in the process of its completion as in “I will build [emphasis mine] my church.” This was illustrated almost immediately in the early church as recorded in Acts 2:47: “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Finally, the verse reminds us that this creation is owned not by the denomination, the elders, nor even the family that donated the land on which the church building was erected but by our Lord: “I will build my church [emphasis mine].”

It is essential as we begin this project that we remember that the church is God's creation, activity, and possession. We, as those "called out" are involved but only as tools to be used by the Master Craftsman for His purpose.

What is the purpose of God (*Missio Dei*) in this world? God's activity began with the creation of the world and all of the things associated with it. The initial pages of Scripture left no doubt that all of creation was an intentional activity of God. But it is vital to note that the creation of the human race stands out as far more than simply one of the parts of the creation as a whole.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen. 1:26-28)

It is impossible to explain adequately the purpose of God without including the saddest chapter in human history—the fall, the rebellion, the disobedience, and the distancing of man from his Creator. Without going into all of the unsightly details of Genesis 3, let it be said that Adam and Eve challenged the authority of the word of God resulting in a separation from Him. They could no longer be comfortable walking and fellowshiping with God. Separated from Him, they were separated from true life itself.

Yet God was not taken unaware nor thwarted. Certainly, this was not part of his original plan nor was it an irretrievable blow to His purpose. In the cursing of Satan, the Serpent, comes a breath of hope. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Satan one day will be fatally crushed by the offspring of Eve.

God's activity with man continued on in a more focused way as He chose to work through a specially chosen race. Choosing Abram, a nomad from Ur of the Chaldeans, He covenanted with him to be the father of this chosen people – Israel.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

*I will make you into a great nation*

*and I will bless you*

*I will make your name great,*

*and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,*

*and whoever curses you I will curse;*

*and all people on earth*

*will be blessed through you."* (Gen. 12:1-3)

Throughout generations, God continued to work with His chosen people until the time of fulfillment, largely unheralded by the historians of that day. It was the time when a baby was born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem of Judea to, of all persons, a virgin. Describing the event, John wrote, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus, the Son of God, was sent from God to earth in human flesh to restore the relationship between Creator and creature, which had been broken in the Garden of Eden, a rupture that continued ever since the event of Genesis 3. It was the good news of the Christ-event that begat the church, the new people of God, to participate in the *mission of God*—in a word, *reconciliation*. Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection had bridged that separation between God and man once and for all time.

The apostle Paul explained the reconciliation of the human race to God in

II Corinthians 5:17-21:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who has no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become righteousness of God.

It was through the death and resurrection of Christ that we have the opportunity to become this *new creation*. Through Christ there is forgiveness of our sin bringing with this forgiveness a new birth . . . we have been born again, or born from above with the resulting divine nature of being born of God Himself (John 1:13 and John 3).

As a result of the reconciliation of God to humanity and our new nature that is produced, there comes reconciliation between human beings as well. God is love and our resulting nature is also love. I John 3:14 speaks to this, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death."

Paul catapults the result of our new nature to nothing less than the realm of the "heavenlies." Ephesians 3:10-11 says: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." Our reconciliation is elevated far beyond our own desires and goals to the eternal realms where God is using *us* to bring glory to *Himself* throughout the entire created universe. This revelation, previously shielded from these "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" is what He accomplished in Christ Jesus—the reconciliation of the fallen, rebellious, divided humanity into a renewed relationship with God and each other. Johnson Oatman, Jr. pictured the scene well when he penned the words to the song,

“Holy, Holy, is what the Angels Sing: But when I sing redemption’s story, they will fold their wings, For angels never felt the joys that our salvation brings”

(<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/h/o/holholis.htm> accessed on 8/18/05).

Yet, the *mission of God* encompasses even more beyond this as the book of Revelation promises:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev. 21:1-3).

The activity of the local church is far from the provincial, private, and personal matter we so often relegate it to be. It is an entity of God, created not only by Him but for Him for His eternal purpose.

The question then begs an answer: **how** is this renewed relationship with God to be accomplished? How is the church to bring about this reconciliation and how does she exhibit “the manifold wisdom of God” to these rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms? Certainly it is not by what we know or teach or the beauty of the building in which we meet. We exhibit this wisdom by whom we have become! The answer is one that virtually explodes from nature itself—fruit bearing! We are to be *witnesses* (Acts 1:8) or exhibitors of what God has been and is accomplishing on earth. The nature of an entity is revealed in the kind of fruit it bears. Apple trees have branches that bear apples and pear trees yield pears . . . and nature of the God-creation, if I might stretch the language a bit, will bear God-engendered fruit.

A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. A tree is identified by the kind of fruit it produces. Figs never grow on thorn bushes or grapes on bramble bushes. A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say. (Luke 6:43-45)

Jesus affirmed this truth in John 15:5-8:

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father.

Fruit-bearing can be easily defined as exhibiting the nature of the tree that bore you. The Apostle Paul refers to the Fruit of the Spirit as qualities of God. "But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control" (Gal. 5:22-23 NLT). A fruit bearing tree will look like what God looks like.

Fruit bearing is not only "being" like what God is but can also be seen as "doing" what God is doing. Love is not a simply warm marshmallow-y feeling any more than joy is but a fixed smile on our faces. To bear the fruit of love, a church will love God, each other, their neighbors, their community, and yes, even their enemies. The healthy church is expected to exhibit the new nature of her Creator. To the healthy church this is *doing what comes naturally*.

This, of course, produces the attractiveness that draws others to God. In John 4 we see Jesus actively bringing the Samaritan woman to faith in Him. This action so dominated His passion that he is not even hungry for the food the disciples had brought to Him. Jesus then launched into His famous harvest teaching in verse 34 and following:

My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work! Do you think the work of harvesting will not begin until the summer ends four months from now? Look around you! Vast fields are ripening all around us and are ready now for the harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. (NLT)

There is a close relationship, though not identity, of fruit-bearing with growth in a healthy church. Writing in *Ministry* (2004, 5) Monte Sahlin pulls no punches by affirming, “Church growth is central to the life of the local church. A healthy, vital congregation is a growing congregation.” Today, in the popular passion for easy and simplistic answers, “church growth” has become not only a major component of a healthy church; it has in many cases become the *only* measurement.

The pastor of the church I attend told the story he had heard about a company that was manufacturing drill bits. The company’s profits were going down and down and the leadership met to figure out what they should do. One of the officers bemoaned the fact that there was no market for drill bits any more. Another jumped on this idea and responded, “There never was any market for drill bits, the market was for *holes!* As long as we think the tool is the end product we miss the point of why we are in business.” Too many churches have the concept that the church itself is that on which we need to focus. We keep it beautiful. We keep the bills paid. We keep functioning on Sunday. Yet, we forget that the church is there to glorify God not by existing, but by bearing fruit! Certainly the Gardener wants us to bear *much* fruit in John 15:1-8, but the stress is not on the number of bushels alone but on the total fruit growing process.

Equating health and numeric growth breeds a host of non-biblical short-cuts designed merely to raise the statistics. Certainly, there can be numeric growth of a church

without producing the fruit for which God calls. George Barna, the well known pollster of churches, warns against this over-identifying of the two factors:

Jesus did not die on the cross to fill up church auditoriums. He died so that people might know God personally and be transformed in all dimensions of their life through their ongoing relationship with Him. Such a personal reformation can happen in a church of any size. After all, the goal of every church should not be numerical growth but spiritual health and vitality. ([www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?](http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?) 9/11/2003)

As one studies the Scriptures, numbers are often recorded but usually more to accommodation of the understanding of man than as a requirement of God. In themselves numbers reflect no value but are usually the means to reflect truth. On the grand epic scale there are the massive armies of angels depicted in the book of Revelation projecting the greatness of the eternal God. Yet in the book of Judges telling the story in the ancient middle east of the tiny group of Gideon's 300 soldiers armed only with pitchers, torches, and trumpets also projects the great power of God. The truth is that the greatness of God is not built upon the number of participants.

The story recorded in I Samuel beautifully illustrates this truth. The army of Israel was being pressed by the far more powerful army of the Philistines. Rather than sit and worry in the camp, King Saul's son, Jonathan, and his armor bearer moved out toward the enemy. Jonathan told his armor bearer, "Perhaps the LORD will help us, for nothing can hinder the LORD. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few!" (14: 6). The two encountered a contingent of the enemy's army and ". . . killed them right and left." With twenty of their soldiers lying dead on the field before them, the rest of the soldiers began running in panic. At that precise moment, God sent an earthquake, throwing the Philistines into confusion. They began killing each other and running away.

The Israelite army was encouraged and came out of their hiding places and God won a great victory that day.

Certainly, we are not to ignore numbers, for they do represent people. We know Jesus chose the twelve. We read that He fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. The Scriptures tell us that the resurrected Christ was seen by more than 500 at one time. There is even an entire book titled "Numbers" in the Old Testament.

The danger comes when to gain numbers we shift our confidence from our God to our resources. Was this the problem David had in the book of II Samuel when he sinned by taking the census of Israel? His trust was in the size of his army rather than in the power of his God. In a day when bigger is always better in about everything but waistlines, even many of our churches have succumbed to the philosophy that size is the sole criteria for measuring success. It is popular today to suggest that church health tends to come more from marketing than fruit bearing. If a church can find a way to grow larger, it is accepted without question or thought given to biblical norms.

Yet, it is quite possible, although not probable, to bear fruit without seeing numeric growth within the church itself. This is especially true where the population is in decline and the economical statistics of an area are dropping, which is usually the condition of the rural/small town church demographic situation. Nevertheless, if people are being brought to eternal life through the ministry of a church we could expect that they would most naturally grow in fellowship with that body of believers.

Churches that bear fruit thrive whereas barrenness brings only striving . . . and a great deal of frustration. God is vitally concerned that we produce that which He has created us to produce. John 15 reminds us that if the branch does not produce fruit He,

the Gardener, cuts off such a branch for destruction. Jesus illustrated this principle the day following the triumphal entry into Jerusalem as recorded in Matthew 21:18-19:

In the morning, as Jesus was returning to Jerusalem, he was hungry, and he noticed a fig tree beside the road. He went over to see if there were any figs on it, but there were only leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' And immediately the fig tree withered up.

There is little patience in the heavenlies with the churches or individuals who do not produce fruit.

Pastor Stanley Cordell, a career pastor of a rural/small town church in central Pennsylvania, and I were discussing the John 15 passage in light of many of the churches in our denomination, especially the majority of the rural/small town churches. His comment hit the heart of the matter: "Do you suspect that after years and decades of never seeing anyone come to Christ through their (rural/small town church) ministry that the Lord is taking action and bringing them to the point of closing their doors?" As I reflected on what he had said, I remembered the parable Jesus told as recorded in Luke 13 about the man who planted the fig tree in his garden. For three years he checked on it "again and again" but was always disappointed. Finally after three years he instructed the gardener to cut it down and use the space for something else. In verses 8-9, "The gardener answered, 'Give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I'll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, you can cut it down'" (NLT).

This project is hopefully being written from the perspective of the heart of that gardener. The track record of many of our rural/small town churches admittedly is not good. Many of these churches are not bearing fruit and indeed, tend toward being toxic in their community and among their own members. Yet, rather than close the doors, we seek

to give them special attention with the hope that they may yet produce the crop for which they were created to the glory of God.

### **The Pastor**

Any thorough study of the people of God throughout history dare not omit reference to their leadership. The biblical accounts of God's people are stories largely focused upon the people whom God raised up to lead them. Certainly, there are the accounts of individuals such as Enoch, Noah, Caleb, and the Shunammite woman, who honored God with their lives. But far more often the story is written from the vantage point of the leader of God's people. Be it the Old Testament priest who bridges the gap between God and His people, the prophet who is the voice of God to His people, the King who governs the people of God, or the New Testament apostle, elder, or deacon, understanding these leaders is the key to understanding the development of the people of God.

The book of Judges is a record of the chaos of a largely leaderless people. After a cyclical litany of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and finally restoration, the book concludes with the explanation: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 21:25).

Unlike leadership studies today, which focus on learned skills and models to mimic as if leadership was simply an add-on to one with a desire to lead, faithful leadership of the people of God as described in scripture depends far more upon relationships. First and primary is the relationship between the leader himself and God. As God selected a people to be His possession, He did so through the man, Abraham. Abraham believed God wholeheartedly and was referred to as "God's friend"

(2 Chron. 20:7, Isa. 41:8, and James 2:23). Later, Moses was chosen by God and was described in Deuteronomy 34:10 as one whom “the Lord knew face to face . . .” And, of course there was David who was confirmed by God as “. . . a man after my own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14 and Acts 13:22). Contrast that with the many unfaithful, rebellious leaders of Israel who were condemned with the words that “their hearts were not fully devoted to the Lord” (1 Kings 15:3 and on and on and on and on . . .).

The second relationship is between the leader and the people of God. It is here that the paradigm of the shepherd-leader comes into full focus. Moses understood the concept well in his prayer in the waning hours of his life as recorded in Numbers 27:16-17: “May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”

Throughout the Old Testament leaders are called “shepherds.” “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (Ps. 78:70-72). While Jesus seemed to have accepted that designation for Himself in John 10, it is not apparent that He had designated his followers to be shepherds until that memorable scene beside the Sea of Tiberius recorded at the end of the book of John. There Simon Peter is at once restored and commissioned with the words, “Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.” All are instructions to one who is called to be a shepherd.

In the early church, the theme continues with the appointment of elders for every town or church (Titus 1:5). Peter laid out their instructions in his first epistle: “To the

elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care . . ." (I Pet. 5:1-2). He then concluded with the promise, "And when Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (5:4).

I believe that it is significant that God chose the shepherd model of leadership for His People. A study of the scripture reveals that God is not simply relating to an agrarian culture when this model was chosen but ties into his very own nature. Psalm 23 beautifully illustrates this relationship.

- 1) The shepherd is the sheep provider . . . *I shall not be in want.*
- 2) He seeks the sheep's best . . . *lie down in green pastures.*
- 3) He is aware of the sheep's limitations . . . *beside quiet waters.*
- 4) He understands weakness and restoration of the flock . . . *restores my soul.*
- 5) The shepherd leads the sheep correctly . . . *along the paths of righteousness.*
- 6) Is near in danger . . . *not fear for you are with me.*
- 7) And the shepherd is in control . . . *your rod and staff, they comfort me.*

Notice the continued stress upon the responsibility of the shepherd for the care of the flock. It is crucial to understand that the sheep are not there for the glory of the shepherd. They are not there to provide a livelihood, to meet his needs nor to build his ego. In fact, they are not there for him at all—the shepherd is there *for the sheep*.

One of the greatest problems in our churches today is that many of them are led by non-shepherds. While shepherding is a condition of the heart in relationship to the flock, the various styles of shepherding easily become ends in themselves.

To the students coming out of our seminaries, there is a broad gamut of optional ministry styles from which to choose. The most popular style we have today is the "CEO" pastor model, which focuses on smooth running machines as if the church were a manufacturing plant. Efficiency, organization, and growth that are measured by "nickels

and noses” are often the bottom line for these pastors. Andy Stanley vocalizes this attitude in an interview in *Leadership*. When asked if we should stop talking about pastors as shepherds he responded, “Absolutely. That word needs to go away.” He continued, “Nothing works in our culture with that model except this sense of the gentle, pastoral care. Obviously that is a facet of church ministry, but that’s not leadership” (2006, 28). Perhaps he would have been more correct had he inserted, “. . . but that’s not *my style* of leadership.” It is interesting that just when the leadership attraction of the business model is so prevalent in the church the pastoral model is being rediscovered by the business community. In the current best seller, *The Way of the Shepherd*, the focus is advice to the MBA graduate who is going to be overseeing an office staff in a company. He is oblivious as to how to do this. The model his mentor suggests is the model of the shepherd with his sheep. Perhaps this word does not really “need to go away” after all. Pastoral leadership as described in Psalm 23:3 stresses relationship leadership rather than organizational leadership. It is the kind of “tend the sheep” mindset rather than that of “overseeing the wool production.”

Other ministry styles include “General” pastors who are inclined to run the flock as if it was an army. Discipline, obedience, and high standards mark these churches and affirm their pastors. The “Teacher” pastors easily view their success by developing a church patterned after the university where study and learning stand preeminent. These, without the accompanying shepherd’s heart for the flock become non-shepherds who often become well known by the self-determined standards of “success” of their pastorates.

On the other end of the spectrum are the pastors who are not well known at all. Still their focus can subtly be on themselves as well though in a much less spectacular way. It is in this group that we often find the pastor of the rural/small town church. In fact, in some cases the job descriptions almost demand such profiles as pulpit committees search for pastors. There is the “Custodial” pastor who is there to keep the doors of the church open and the bills paid. She is usually merely marking time until something better comes along. Closely aligned with the custodial pastor is the “Chaplain” pastor. She, usually with her gift of mercy, is responsive to the cries of the sheep and ministers to their hurts, actions in themselves that can easily imitate the true shepherd. But the flock never ventures to green pastures or is led anywhere be it on paths of righteousness or, for that matter, on any paths at all. The “Chaplain” often in heart is working to find her significance in being needed by the flock and has no desire to upset the status quo. The flock is again the tool for the shepherd rather than the shepherd being there for the sheep.

Obviously, there are many types of pastoral styles among these groups but notice that in any of these, without the accompanying shepherd’s heart, the focus or goal has to do with personal fulfillment by the *use* of the flock rather than the *care* of it. They are “shepherds” whose personal success is their predominant concern. Sometimes it is the thirst for notoriety and sometimes it is laziness, but their focus is always on the shepherd and not on the sheep.

Jesus absolutely abhorred the “user” leader. He approached this truth directly in John 10 where he contrasted the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep with the hired hand who views the flock only as a livelihood. It is the hired hand who serves

for what he receives from the flock that will desert his position immediately when there is danger to him.

This truth is expounded to an even greater degree of intensity in Ezekiel.

Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd . . . (Ezek. 34:2-5)

The Lord continued in judgment:

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. (Ezek. 34: 7-10)

To the abused flock, God, in his love for His own promised to supply “. . . shepherds after my own heart who will lead you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15).

Then, with the thunderous drum roll of prophecy Isaiah announced a coming shepherd messiah in 40:11, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” No wonder Jesus is referred to by the writer of the Hebrews as “*that great Shepherd of the sheep*” [emphasis mine] (Heb. 13:20).

While the heart of the shepherd is essential to the effective leading of God’s flock, having the mind of the shepherd is essential as well. The servant who thinks like a shepherd is concerned for the health of the sheep and works to bring the sheep to their full ability to function as sheep. The shepherd keeps the sheep eating well and drinking

the pure water rather than from fetid puddles of water. She checks the sheep for injuries and infections so that the sheep will grow to best do what sheep do . . . produce wool!

The pastor with the shepherd's mind is concerned that the sheep of his flock are fruitful. Here the metaphor breaks down a bit, for instead of producing wool, the sheep of God's flock produces that which God created them to produce . . . fruit.

While the literal shepherd has no aspirations that the sheep of his flock will ever become shepherds, the shepherd of the flock of God finds exactly that as his goal. As the *Great Shepherd of the sheep* calls His sheep to follow Him, he is not suggesting that they simply go where He goes, but in reality become like him! This is the mission of the shepherds to the flock they minister to as well.

It is he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare God's people for works of service*, [emphasis mine] so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)

Paul set the pattern for leading the flock of God in his second letter to a member of his flock, Timothy. "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2).

This does not only produce healthy sheep, it also produces a healthy flock. In Exodus 18, there is the account of Moses leading the flock of God, the newly formed nation of Israel. His in-laws came for a visit and his father-in-law Jethro noticed that Moses left after breakfast and did not return until long after the children are in bed. He confronted Moses with his burn-out schedule, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for

you; you cannot handle it alone” (Exod. 18:17-18). He then proceeded to lay out an organization chart involving others in the nation to help bear the load.

There is serendipity to all of this. As Moses shared the responsibility with others, they too became involved in leading the sheep improving the lot of the entire flock. The temptation for the rural/small town pastor is to try to “earn his keep” by keeping busy tending the flock himself. This rebels against both the wellness of the pastor and the wellness of the flock. The pastor who develops other shepherds realistically may not personally profit from this action in that the small church by nature has somewhat limited opportunities. But the larger flock of God benefits much as often those the shepherd has trained move into areas of ministry in other churches, often rural/small town churches.

As an example in Leadwood, Missouri, a small town in the area of east central part of the state, there is a Church of God. That church stands among the top three or four churches in the denomination in producing leadership for the whole body of the Churches of God. Still this church remains one that averages around one hundred in worship attendance year after year.

It is not in the least coincidental that the healthy, fruit-producing rural/small town church is one led by a person chosen or called by God who has the heart and mind of a true shepherd. These are the churches that *thrive* in Kingdom growth while others simply *strive*.

CHAPTER THREE  
LITERATURE AND OTHER SOURCES

**Introduction**

A common element of rural/small town churches is that they are overwhelmingly comprised of small churches. While my emphasis is on the rural and small town churches, it must be admitted that my research necessarily overlaps into small churches in other geographical areas as well. Carl Dudley, who has researched small churches for over a quarter of a century, concludes from his studies: “We were genuinely surprised at the basic similarities among all small churches. . . . in the way that people related to one another, small congregations have more in common with other small churches than they do with larger congregations in the community, or in their denominational communion” (2003, 20).

The most obvious reason that rural/small town churches are small is because they are located in areas where the population is small. Certainly, with the improved means of travel, they are not restricted by the limitations of the population as they were in former years. However, unless there is an outstanding, non-typical charismatic pastor, program, history, or unique teaching drawing them to travel, an average American church attendee seldom ventures long distances to attend a church with any regularity.

The phenomenon of the last decade or so in the church-world has been the rise of the *mega*-church. The common thread of these churches is their attractiveness to the

baby-boom generation. Their music resonates with that generation. Their programs align with their values. There is a passion for excellence in everything that the *boomers* have come to expect. As a result, the ecclesiastical world is beating a path to the door of these “successful” churches asking “how they did it” and a parade of their literature is making its way onto the desk of every pastor in the United States and throughout the world at large.

Believing that the rural/small town church fifty miles from the nearest fast food restaurant is only a small version of the mega-church in the suburbs of Chicago, mega-church programs are applied unthinkingly by many pastors expecting similar results. There is nothing more sad than to see a congregation back in the hinterland comprised of grey-haired members called to stand up for long periods of time, squinting to read the words of unfamiliar choruses projected on the front wall, clapping their hands to the beat of loud drums, in order hopefully to turn the declining worship attendance of the church around and begin to grow!

Lyle Schaller, whom I consider one of the finest students of the church in America, has written a book, *The Small Church is Different*. In it he has illustrated the differences between various churches:

... the congregation averaging less than 35 or 40 at worship can be represented by an acorn squash, the church averaging 125 at worship can be depicted by a pumpkin, the congregation averaging 200 at worship might be portrayed by a horse, and the huge church averaging 500 or 600 or more at worship can be symbolized by a fifteen-room house. They are not simply different size specimens from the same genus or species. They are almost as different from one another as a village is unlike a large central city. It is impossible to produce a pumpkin by combining three acorn squashes. The person who is very competent in raising pumpkins may not be an expert at caring for horses. The fifteen-room house requires both maintenance and a different kind of care than the garden in which one raises squash and pumpkins. A different perspective and a different set of

criteria should be used in grading squash or pumpkins than would be used in judging a horse or appraising a large house. (2003, 12)

While the mega-church commands the majority of the ink in our religious journals, according to a research project conducted by the Hartford Seminary, only 6.2% of regular church attendees attend a congregation that numbers 1,000 or more in average worship attendance. On the other hand, nearly half of the regular parishioners make their way into churches with an average worship attendance of less than 100 (<http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/Foldertree/index.html>, 2005). With these numbers, it is obvious that these rural/small town churches are worth the study.

In this chapter I am focusing on the distinct characteristics of the rural/small town church. If these characteristics are ignored or misunderstood frustration will abound and confusion will reign and the churches will seldom thrive but rather nearly always merely strive.

### **Cultural Distinctives**

“Ever been scheduled to both take the offering and play the offertory during the same service? Found yourself the sole soprano while singing hymns? Been locked out of your worship space because the only two key holders were both out of town? If so, you probably belong to a small congregation” (*Leadership* 2005, 75).

The rural/small town churches are unique entities to say the least. Yet, they have far more in common than location and size. These churches, because of those two characteristics, are both communities—unfortunately, they are usually deteriorating communities. A generation ago, all of the children in the area went to the same school. Families all knew each other well. When your daughter would date, she would no doubt

date a young man who lived on the next farm over, whose family you knew at least two or three generations back. It was expected that your children would take over the farm when you retired and that the farm could always produce enough to feed you and your grandchildren in the meantime. People would all shop at the same grocery store and would buy their gas at the same local filling station. There was a sense of safety, of continuity, and of peace.

Then came a gigantic shift, fueled by television, ease of travel, and the general philosophy that bigger was always better. The schools were consolidated with grade schools, middle schools, and high schools built on sprawling campuses replacing the single buildings that housed first through twelfth grades down on the corner. Big, yellow busses crisscrossed the area taking the communities' children miles away for their education. Grocery stores and gas stations began to close their doors as commercial ventures out by the freeway offered more variety and better prices than local establishments could possibly provide.

Larger farms became a necessity due to the combination of the spiraling escalation of the cost of machinery and the continual decline of the price of agricultural commodities. According to recent figures from the Agriculture Department there were 1.9 million farms in 1997. This number of farms is the lowest since 1850 when 1.4 million farms were counted in the United States. One by one, the children of farmers are forced to opt for jobs elsewhere. The family farm is quickly becoming only a memory in many places.

Until recently, there has been little population movement into the rural/small town area compared to the huge outflow of people to the areas of comparatively greater

economic opportunities. Jobs with living wages have acted as a magnet, drawing people to the larger populated areas. As a result, there is often a relationship of mutual dependency on the part of those who are left simply to survive. They learn to lean on each other for support and depend on each other for the very survival of their social structure. In many cases an “us against the world” siege mentality seems to prevail.

Still, small churches are tough organisms. In 1994, I became the Director of the Churches of God, General Conference. The fact that that fully one-third of our churches had congregations with an average worship attendance of less than 35 concerned me greatly. A short time before, the CGGC had received dire warnings from church consultants that we would be facing a loss of one-third of our congregations within the next decade. The small churches within our denomination were geographically located primarily in small towns and rural settings. The majority of them were family churches with the family patriarchs and matriarchs holding everything together with a desperate white-knuckled grip. When they died, which would probably begin to happen in the next decade, their children could then be expected to leave the church. With the passing of their parents, the glue that held them there would be gone. For the consultants, this prediction was a “no-brainer.”

It is now more than a decade later and the number of our congregations has varied some but not nearly as drastically as had been promised. What has happened that the experts had not counted on was the tenacity of these churches. Small churches are hardy beyond belief. As some have said, “They just refuse to die!” They are like dandelions the morning after a generous dose of weed killer was spread. They can be seen lifting their yellow blossoms above the green grass as if nothing at all had happened.

Small town/rural churches have a shared history that provides a kind of security blanket for those who are a part of the church. The congregation knows what to expect, be it at a Sunday morning worship service or at a Tuesday evening elders' meeting; whether it is the fact that the offering is taken right after the choir anthem on Sunday morning or toward whom all eyes turn when a decision is to be made on Tuesday evening. It is in this context that the church's stories develop that bind the church together historically that also tend to breed exclusiveness. It must be said that the onset of this mentality is seldom noticed and certainly unintentional. It is just that these churches in rural and small town areas are based upon long-term relationships. Because of that, those who have come in the last twenty-five years are continually reminded that they are the "new kids on the block" with comments such as, "I remember the Sunday you came here for the first time!" Unfortunately, this common history is regularly referred to to reinforce the old timer's connectedness when threatened by new people in the church and remind them that they are excluded from that connectedness.

### **Change**

With this shared history being so important to these congregations, it is no wonder that change is not looked on as being a friend. Change, or the lack of it, is an issue that is huge in the rural/small town church. Typically, because of the longevity of the lay leadership, "the way we have always done things" carries great weight. Add to this the fact that people historically are not prone to move in and out of the area bringing fresh perspectives to these churches. Over time, "the way we have always done things" becomes "the *only* way we will *ever* do things."

H. B. London writes from years of experience in his book, *The Heart of a Great Pastor*: “Futurists say knowledge changes every five years, but the Church takes 40 years to consider changing her Sunday morning schedule and then votes against it!” (1994, 38). I am told that the Episcopalians have an old saying that fits here, “Be we High or Low, the Status is Quo.”

Life changes with time. In order to remain the same there must be actual decisions, tacitly or overtly, to do so. New ideas are examined with innate suspicion. There is a “gatekeeper” mindset throughout the church that not only rejects new concepts but also rejects those who introduce them, be it a visitor, new member, or new pastor.

Schaller notes the few expectations of pastors in small congregations. “All the members ask is they be reasonably polite, excel in conducting funerals, respect local traditions, carefully avoid forcing the members to choose up sides on a divisive issue, speak the language of the people, and not attempt to change ‘how we do church here’” (2003, 86).

In the *Toledo Blade* issue of January 11, 2004, Kim Bates writes a poignant article regarding the closing of the First Presbyterian Church of Milton Center, Ohio.

The old oak church pews and stained glass that for decades adorned the First Presbyterian Church are now numbered and ready for an upcoming sale. White cloths cover additional items near the church kitchen, which will be handed off later this month to the highest bidder. Similar to other small churches across the region, including two other Presbyterian churches right in Wood County, Milton Center’s only remaining church has shut its door and will be sold at auction on January 24. “It’s just sad. But it’s a sign of the times,” longtime member Barb Chamberlain of nearby Custar said this week. “We knew it was inevitable.”

Inevitable? Milton Center is the home to *only* 195 people. The church was 135 years old and I suspect that when it was started, the community had far fewer people than 195. A community of 195 people can support a church but not in the way it has “always

been done!” I would suggest rather that this is a church that has decided to close rather than paying the price of changing.

Fear also plays a part in this reluctance to change. As the attendance decreases there is a greater need to keep each of these people coming, and giving, and especially – happy. Risk is not something smaller churches are fond of taking. Whereas the large church or organization may step out boldly in embracing the new, knowing that failure could cause a dip on the screen, the smaller body recognizes that failure would not just be a small dip but could quite easily be a mortal blow to its very existence.

History too, has left its mark on the status quo. The pews have brass plates with names on them, not for reserved seating but to help those in the church to remember the past. There are the brass plates on the stained glass windows, the communion table and pulpit chairs, and yes, the organ and piano as well. Open the hymnals and you will likely see names in the front of each of them, names of people long departed but remembered nevertheless. To paraphrase the words of William Willimon, “The best thing about you is your past” (1999, 23). Enough to say, the rural/small town church is heavily invested in the way things are.

Near Yates Center, Kansas, the New York Valley Church of God was located on a gravel road about eight miles out of town. Several years ago, Wirt McKee became their pastor and suddenly the church began to grow. Soon the church was overflowing with people and the obvious question was, where are we going to put everyone? It was decided to build another building, this one in the town itself. How were they going to handle the plethora of brass plates without causing great conflict? In a brilliant decision, the church donated their building *and its contents* to the local historical society that manages to keep

it intact as a museum where anyone can come in and remember the past to their heart's content. The new building was thus freed up to plan for the future. Certainly, forcing the rural/small town church to focus on the future rather than the past is no small matter.

The flywheel principle as described in the book *Good to Great* as being a crucial part of great companies has a correspondingly detrimental effect on the rural/small town church. While the flywheel helps perpetuate momentum by nature, it is anticipated that the direction will be forward. If, however, the momentum is moving backwards that principle only increases the momentum towards extinction.

As a result of this reluctance to change, few new people remain in a church long or, if they do, their cutting edge is soon blunted as they seek to "fit in" with the church culture. The greatest negative issue is, of course that without new life being breathed into the church, while it may strive, and usually does so, massively yet eventually the church dies.

To live is to change, whether it is learning to walk or determining how to keep one's waistline from enlarging. Thriving churches recognize that we live in a different world with different ways of communicating. Twenty years ago who ever would have thought of sending letters by e-mail without envelopes and stamps? Change attacks not only our ways of doing things but even the ways we think as modernity increasingly gives way to post-modernity. Change is everywhere and even our concepts of community must be enlarged with freeways and seventy-miles-per-hour speed limits freeing residents to greatly enlarge their own personal borders.

If a church is to thrive, change is vital while routine is lethal. Change brings with it innovation and adaptation to those of our generation. It brings the church up-to-date

with the society in which we live. Change de-emphasizes the shared history as well as allowing new people to relate more easily and enjoy coming.

Yet, churches also know that change can bring chaos. How good is change when no one joins in worship service because they do not know the words to the new praise choruses? How good is change when the church's mid-week reminder goes out by e-mail and the older members are excluded because they have no computer? Change can also result in shallowness as many changes are not thought out but made simply because other groups are making them with apparent success.

The challenge of change is always at the doorstep of individuals and churches. These changes are not always of the magnitude of jettisoning the pipe organ and bringing in the guitars but more often than not seemingly innocuous issues like moving the communion table.

Change, not handled well, results in a divided church, the loss of people, and the fracture of fellowship. Those who favor change are seeking to get the church "unstuck" from old, meaningless, ways of doing things. Those countering the changes are desperately afraid that the "baby will be thrown out with the bathwater." Because of the importance of the church in people's lives, changes of all kinds are suspect of robbing us of what we have and are fought against with the tenacity of a bulldog.

Pastor Nevin Umbel, pastor of the Sand Spring Church of God in southwest Pennsylvania, shared with a group of us that there are two major dangers for the church today. The first and greatest danger is that we might change the message. There is continual vigilance, even leading to bordering on paranoia, in the pews to make sure this does not happen. The second danger, though seldom appreciated by the church is that we

might not change our methods. The ironic result in this is that it is possible that in trying to preserve our methods we can easily distort the changeless message. For example proclaiming the message of the gospel the way we did back in 1959 comforts the believers in the church but totally misses reaching out to the non-believer in 2007—the very people whom we are specifically called to make into disciples.

The first step in making changes is an understanding of the church itself.

In writing “Upon Taking a Small Church,” David Hansen gives the following advice:

Spend the first year learning what the church does well. After all, it has survived; there must be a reason. Find that reason. Learning is an attitude as much as anything. Are you going there as their savior? Or are you going there to find out what the Spirit has been up to? Small churches have gifts like individual Christians do. You will find they have a *corporate personality*. The Holy Spirit uses this personality; that is the church’s gift. Build on the personality. (1990, 78)

Michael and Deborah Jenkins endorse this and add important insights into the change process in their book *The Character of Leadership*. They admit that “. . . the more traditional congregation affiliation—the sort one observes in closely knit rural churches or in small town and community based congregations in which membership is based on long-term relationships and abiding loyalties to well-established sets of faith and cultural traditions—it not easily shaken, and may endure for generations” (1998, 44).

This being the case they continue by writing, “Substantive changes are only possible, in fact, when they appear to the members of the group as natural to the evolution of the culture, as more or less the necessary adaptation of the group to changes in its larger environment . . .” (1998, 90).

And more, “If the leader discerns a need for change . . . it is best to see to it that the change itself must retain as much as possible of what is old; *innovation branches*

*must be seen to grow from the trunk and root* [emphasis mine]. Only tyrants and dictators can ignore the coherence and continuity of culture” (1998, 90).

In order to bring the necessary change with a minimal amount of boat rocking, the change must be rooted in Scripture. The reason for the change must be congruent with the mission of the church . . . bearing fruit (Chapter Two) and joining with the *Missio Dei*. To change without this underlying basis is simply like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Bringing the church to a re-examination of its reason for being, its mission, forces it to examine itself not on the false basis of comfort and survival but on the basis of its outreach into its community and into its world. Such an honest study of scripture should produce a genuine openness in the evangelical rural/small town congregation to the needed change in focus. These churches usually do hold a high view of the scriptures and I believe when led will honestly seek to follow its teachings.

The church of today in America tends to focus inwardly rather than outwardly. Reggie McNeal writes in *The Present Future* that the problem is “. . . the North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists” (2003, 15). He goes on to add that having forgotten “why” they exist, they have re-focused inwardly on survival. They have developed a kind of “club” mentality. He writes, “In these . . . churches ministry is spent largely to provide hospice care for the dying church, to ease its pain as much as possible. The refuge churches maintain their denial through more club member activities, better club member facilities, and more staff to attend to club member needs” (2003, 26).

The thriving church is focused on their mission, their reason for existence, and has made the difficult change in their church culture from the fortress mentality keeping others from coming in to one of outreach actually seeking to draw others in.

### **Outreach**

Loren Mead in his book *The Once and Future Church* writes of the major change in the way the church faced the world in the early church. They were a small group in a hostile environment. The mission of the church was just outside their doors and their job was to proclaim the gospel everywhere they went. They would return to church for encouragement. Every member was involved in the battle with the hostile forces outside of the church's walls.

Then, in the fourth century, Constantine was converted and Christianity became the religion of the whole world! Everyone was a Christian by being born in the country. Instead of a missionary outpost in a hostile world, the church became the hub of the community. Churches were defined by geography . . . they were parishes! The mission of getting the gospel out became foreign policy rather than reaching a hostile culture just outside the doors of the church and the laity was simply not involved in that mission.

Despite the fact that the world has changed radically from the Christian world of Constantine, the paradigm has held fast to today, especially in the rural/small town church where the geographic, parish concept as the center of the community is still strong. Missions is still seen as the responsibility of the professional and usually done overseas. The laity has had the nerve of personal involvement in the mission of the church cut.

If the rural/small town church is to join in the *Missio Dei*, it must “open . . . (its) eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). It is interesting that the context of that admonition by Jesus to His disciples was to counter their great concern about the meal and how *Jesus could not be hungry . . .* or in the context of the rural/small town church, we are not exceeding our bounds when we suggest that perhaps the disciples were primarily concerned about the coming *pot-luck* dinner? When the church forgets the *Missio Dei* and focuses only inwardly on survival it will not only fail to bear fruit but will suffocate in the process. The rural/small church, as every church, must be looking outwardly in her mission. While this takes effort, it is not at all that foreign a concept.

We have a tendency to look at our circumstances and the mindset of society as always in opposition to our ministry. In fact, there is a giant groundswell in thinking today that actually works to our advantage. Modernity’s thinking was based on Newtonian physics where the universe was understood as a giant “thing.” Things, it was believed, could be torn apart for observation and study. “The assumption was that if we could understand the parts we could understand the whole” (McNeal, 2006, 123). This led to the philosophy that if we could explain how the universe worked, we did not need God. In these circumstances, the church found herself doing battle with science and spent much time defending the faith.

Scientists have discovered a better understanding of the universe: “quantum physics.” The difference is that the more they probed, the more they realized that the basic was not a “thing” at all but a complex network of relationships. They have

discovered that in fact *everything* was connected. This has huge ramifications for clarifying the thinking of the mission of the church.

Reggie McNeal has brought this new thinking to bear on the “old” teaching of what the Scriptures say the church should be.

Community is also one of the themes of the emerging missional church. As opposed to a worldview and ministry approach where the church could exist practically unconnected to its surrounding community (and many do!), the missional church is turned outward toward its community. Missional congregations and their leaders strategize ways to connect with people who are not a part of their congregation. Again, a sense of collective “belonging” permeates this approach.

The kingdom theology is also in ascendancy that helps missional congregations see themselves as part of the larger work of God in the world. This stands in sharp contrast to the perspective of many in the old church culture who practice church as a “silo” religious experience isolated (and insulated) from the rest of the world, with the church considered to be both the focus and recipient. A kingdom view sees God’s redemptive mission being carried out in the world (extended beyond the church culture).

Spiritual leaders who want to practice greatness today operate within the quantum universe, emphasizing connectivity, belonging, and community. The insight that the universe exists as a series of relationships is not news to them. After all, the central tenet of Christian theology is that God exists in community. Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy a relationship that has spilled out into the created order, all the way into the subatomic region. The search for belonging is part of what it means for humans to be created in the image of God. People need each other. We are relational beings. We not only want to belong, we only come to a true understanding of who we are in our relationships with God and with other people. We must belong to be fully alive. (2006, 123-124)

The move toward outreach does not only align itself with modern thinking, it is not as drastic a step practically as it appears at first glance. It does not necessarily involve an external, professional missionary. Once again, the mission field is just outside their door. It is their community; it is their parish. Certainly, there is truth to the concept of rural/small town churches being family churches, but families in the small communities are different than families in the suburbs of our larger towns. In the latter, families tend to

be exclusive and their homes become their castles when the doors are shut. It is common for suburbanites to not only relate little to their next-door neighbors socially but the truth is that a large number of them do not even know the names of the people who live across the street. In contrast the rural/small town churches' families are far more inclusive in the smaller communities.

Historically, they have intermarried with other families in the community, they have had to rely upon other families, economically as well as socially, and they know each other's history—both strengths and weaknesses.

What's a neighbor? Well, when I went to my neighbor's house on Saturday or Sunday, if I wanted a cup of coffee I never waited until the lady of the house asked me. I just went into the dish cabinet and got me a cup of coffee or a glass of juice just like it was my own home. They come to my house, they done the same. See?

Neighbor? It means relationship. It means kin. It means friends you could depend on. You never went to a neighbor with a complaint that they didn't listen to or somebody didn't try to help you with. That's a neighbor. When you wanted a baby-sitter you went next door and they'd baby-sit. Or you did something for them. They'd either need something or we'd need something, you know. When you see somebody going down the road, it's "where are you going?" "To the store." "Well, bring me back such and such." (Erikson 1976, 188)

The other side of the coin of this close community is the exclusiveness that it also breeds. This is usually seen in the attitude toward those who have come in from outside in roughly the last twenty to twenty-five years. These people upset the chemistry of the relationships that have been established among the natives. They pose a threat to the relationships that make up the "church" community. It does not matter that they have been living in the community for decades; these "outsiders" have yet to "prove" their trustworthiness. They need to show that they understand the underpinning values of the community or church. Not only does this tend to strangle outreach beyond the historic

community, it tends to place those who have recently moved into the area and community including the pastor and her family at arm's length for a significant period of time.

It is true that most rural/small town churches sit in the middle of a natural mission field . . . their community. People today are hungry to be a part of a community. They want that sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. They want to be identified as being a part of the larger society as it gives them a measure of acceptance and thus, security. It gives them a sense of who they are. This often produces a tension between the church that is closed to outsiders and the outsiders needing to and often desiring to get inside and to belong.

The "Best of Life" Sunday school class in a church I pastored had been together for years. One day I asked how many of them had started attending in the last 25 years – no one. Into this class came Clint and Kay. They had lived in the community for years. Clint was witty and gregarious and worked hard at breaking into the class. They attended the class every Sunday and participated in every social event. After about three years they no longer attended. No matter the intensity of their effort, they simply could not break into the fellowship. They were not intentionally excluded but the passing of time had made the walls formidably exclusive and only intentional, determined effort by those in the class would ever break them down so that others would be able to break in. The "invite your friends to church" mode of outreach simply does not work solo in such a situation.

The church that understands its mission attacks this social barrier and focuses on ways of drawing those outside the walls into the fellowship. In reaching out, the

rural/small town church does not have to learn a new language. It is not forced to study the culture. It does not have to take time to get to know the people.

Of course, the people of the church are known as well. Small town people have long memories and many who have remained a lifetime in a community are still referred to as “Tommy, the boy who egged the principal’s car!” even though the actual event occurred some thirty years previously. This and the categories in which people in the community are placed—their family does not go to church, the Bensons are Catholic, Bob and Irene “had” to get married, Bill Collins is divorced—put formidable barriers to outreach on the part of the church and receptivity of many in the community.

Historically in most rural/small town areas, the church was the center of the community. It was the place where you went to find out the latest news of what was happening in the community, where you went to meet members of the opposite sex who came from “good” homes, and where you went to get married. The church typically was the place for the introduction of new babies to the community via the baptism or child dedication route. The church would also be the place from where you would be buried. All of life in the community was bound up in the church.

Even when communities have more than one church, the churches are usually connected to and in their community. Few rural/small town communities do not have combined church Thanksgiving Day services or Easter Sunrise services. Rural/small town churches are not competitive, except perhaps in the minds of some of the pastors. There is a mutual pride in their churches and a mutual ownership of their pastors.

I vividly remember the occasion when I learned this first hand. I had traveled to a hospital twenty-five miles away from our community to visit the mother of one of the

ladies in the church I pastored. Her daughter had asked me to make the visit, but when I walked into the room I was jolted to see Pastor Pratt, her mother's pastor, sitting beside the bed. Instead of the chill I expected from being caught visiting members of this pastor's church, he jumped up and shook my hand. "Wayne, we were just talking about you. We think you are such a good addition to our community! Come on over here and let's have prayer together." Later, as we rode down the elevator together, I anticipated at least a mild chastisement. Instead he said, "You know twenty-five miles is a long way to come for a visit. Why don't we keep each other informed about who we have in the hospital and that way we would only have to make half as many trips!" I discovered that our congregation was never happier than when we joined with the other churches for community services.

Paved roads and ease of travel, consolidated school systems, and commuting to work are just some of the things that have caused the deterioration of the rural/small town community structure in the United States. Usually the last remaining vestige of the bygone days of community is the church. And that too in many areas unfortunately seems to be following the trend towards extinction.

When the community consciousness of the rural/small town church begins to deteriorate, the first place it can usually be noticed is the upkeep of the church building and grounds. The ball field is overgrown with weeds and the backstop is rusty and bent. The swings are broken and the chains rusty. Where there may be a picnic table, it is white with age and badly warped. The lawn is usually mowed but the landscaping is filled with overgrown bushes and accumulated trash. The church building is badly in need of paint. The sign in the front has not been changed in years with rust making it no longer readable

nor accessible. It is almost as if a “who cares” attitude has overtaken the church itself. Stephen McMullin writes of his experience a rural church. “During my first year, we did a survey in the smaller church. The members all said the church was well-kept; the nonmembers said the church was dirty. The nonmembers were right; the members had simply stopped noticing” (1988, 82).

As the mines close and the limited available land no longer allows the next generation to carry on the family farm business, the younger people are forced to look elsewhere for employment. At times there are nearby industries but in the majority of cases, the children and their families must move a distance away. Building on family loyalty, many of them return back to their small church so that they can visit family and keep the church functioning for “mom and dad.” Gradually, the rural/small town church moves from being a community center to a family church and from an outreach mode to one of survival. Hence, the amnesia referred to by McNeal begins to set in. This is the curse of the merely striving church. The rural/small town church continues to function for years, especially when one of the wealthy members leaves a sizable endowment to the church to keep the doors open. Yet, even in its increased longevity, the attendance continues a trend of decline and few, if any are touched by the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ and the *Missio Dei* in the world is only a memory and a passing reference. They are just marking time, awaiting the inevitable.

### **Self Esteem**

Power and control are desirable traits for all of us . . . in our fallen nature. When a church shrinks to a certain point, those with the gifts of leadership and administration usually have left and most of those who remain are primarily gifted only with a dogged

tenacity—extolled as “faithfulness.” Their primary mission is to keep the church doors open and the bills paid. This feeds the power and control issues. Quite without intention, *church bosses* and *belle heifers* begin to surface in the rural/small town church. They, with their power, control the church to the point of strangulation and new people are almost always considered a threat. So the congregation slowly dies off one by one as the church views itself as a beleaguered kind of club rather than an effective *Missio Dei*.

The church is too small to afford a full-time pastor like other churches do, which reinforces their feelings of inferiority. They see themselves deficient as a church because of this and cannot fathom why anyone would ever want to attend their church. Add to this frame of mind, the rural/small town church is largely ignored by their denominations or if attended to, seen as a problem. “Between 1972 and 2000, the United Methodist church, through mergers and dissolutions, eliminated at least a thousand very small congregations” (Schaller 2003, 54-55). These closures are not mean-spirited but recognition that there is a true shortage of pastors today. With the cost of supporting a pastor increasing continually, only a church with an average of at least 125 or more can afford to employ one in a full-time capacity. The rural/small town church of fifty in attendance is hit with still another blow.

This being the situation, rural/small town churches find themselves faced with a continual parade of young pastors, fresh out of seminary, who are sent *to get their feet wet* or *to gain some experience*. Knowing this is the reason, the rural/small town church comes to the conclusion that they are *not very good churches* and that they will keep their pastor, if effective, for only a year or two before he moves on to greener pastures. If, on

the other hand, the pastor is not effective, he may stay on for an unlimited time not only being ineffective but usually unhappy to be “stuck” there.

This cycle of short-term pastorates tends to feed on itself with each transition striking another blow to the church’s feeling of self worth. “If rural churches could experience the joy of long and positive pastoral tenures, it would build their self-esteem. The stronger self-esteem would help attract and hold the next pastor. This would reverse the cycle” (Fredrickson 2005, 17-18).

Church consultant Kent Hunter believes that, “. . . to break the cycle, seminaries need to identify the joys and challenges of ministry in a rural culture. If this was done in special classes, future pastors would begin to consider rural as an option instead of a white elephant door prize. Some seminary students would be encouraged to prepare specifically for a rural career” (1993, 100).

On the other end of the spectrum age-wise are the retirees who do not have enough retirement income to live on without other employment. Rather than becoming a greeter at Walmart, they are sent out to the rural/small town churches to *finish their ministry*. With social security supplementing their income, they can usually come for far less money than other pastors. On occasion, this can be a productive arrangement if the pastor has not lost his passion and continues to relate to the pastorate as a calling rather than a way of earning a living.

Of course, the downside of this solution is that older pastors often see the rural/small town church as a place to slow down and coast awhile. With that attitude, they can easily overstay their effectiveness and remain merely out of necessity to keep their family fed. The rural/small town church is faced with the problem of removing such a

pastor, which often leaves her with no place to go and nowhere to live and leaves them with no assurance of ever getting a replacement. As such, the rural/small town church bears a disproportionate share of pastoral retirement problems. However, with our increased emphasis on pensions and planning for retirement, this problem should not be as pressing in the future as it is today. Combining all of these problems facing the rural/small town church, it is not difficult to understand that these churches have a problem with self-esteem. They do not believe they are valuable and therefore are without hope for a future other than survival.

It is not a gigantic leap of speculation to suggest that low self-esteem leads directly to despair. Despair is the mindset of many of our rural/small town churches. Lack of hope is the destroyer of churches. This feeds on itself and convinces itself that there is really no hope for the future of the church. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and the congregation clings to survival of the church desperately hoping only that it will survive until at least they can be buried from it.

It is tempting to refer back to Ezekiel 37:3 as Ezekiel is looking over the valley filled with dry bones and hearing God ask, "Son of man, can these bones live?" The prophet replies as we reply to our situations, "O sovereign LORD, you alone know."

### **Leadership Model**

The ideal leader of the rural/small town church is the shepherd (Chapter Two). Because the mega-church is the church of choice by publishers of books and editors of magazines, their use of the business model of leadership is often portrayed as the only successful model of church leadership. Pastors conclude that if they are to be successful in their career, the church they pastor must be large. Or, if they are to be successful, the

church they pastor, if not already large, must be going toward becoming large. If they are to be considered successful, the church they pastor must be recognized as being significant and they are taught that only large churches are significant.

The business model of leadership naturally looks for programs or procedures to turn the church around.

An entire industry has been spawned to help churches do whatever it is they decide to do. . . . a spate of program fixes have consistently overpromised and underdelivered. The suggestions are plentiful: offer small groups, contemporize your worship, market your services, focus on customer service, create a spiritual experience, become seeker-friendly, create a high-expectation member culture, purify the church from bad doctrine, return the church to the basics. After decades of this kind of environment no wonder church leaders are a little skeptical about the “next thing” and why many feel that just about the time they catch up they fall further behind. (McNeal 2003, 7)

The rural/small town churches are seen as ideal launching pads for great success stories by ambitious pastors who long to make their mark as being successes. They focus on the organization, believing that if they build the perfect church, the crowds will pour through the doors. So “. . . the mailings keep coming, the seminars keep filling up, and the conference notebooks keep stacking up on the shelves” (McNeal 2003, 7).

We are not talking about right and wrong ways of leading here but about different ways. Not everyone believes that to be true, but sees the difference as being the old, outdated ways versus the new ways of leadership. Ted Haggard the former president of the National Association of Evangelicals as well as the former pastor of a mega-church in Colorado Springs, CO. In an interview in the *Christian Management Report* Ted was asked, “Are there aspects of traditional approaches to church and parachurch management that you feel have become outmoded or possibly hinder the work of Christ?” He replies:

Yes, and I would say NAE represents some of the challenges inherent in traditional approaches that emphasize inclusion over efficiency. NAE is a large organization that represents many groups, and its board is huge because it emphasizes inclusion. But I believe that in our post-agrarian society, people value efficiency more than inclusion. (Rabey 2006, 15)

Yes, it is a correct approach of leadership for some organizations, but for the rural/small town church *inclusion* is the way leaders *must* lead to be effective. Notice how easily Haggard has dumped the rural church society from view with the term “our post-agrarian society.” This approach has nothing to do with plowing corn. It has to do with the way different societies operate.

While the business model of leadership fits the mega-church well, the culture of the rural/small town church finds itself to be a round peg in a square hole. They see the organization as simply the housing or structure for the church. It is the skin that enables the body to function. The people and their relationships are the soul and spirit. To the rural/small town church these are the things that truly matter.

Glenn Daman, the director of Village Missions Center for Leadership Development, has addressed this issue in an outstanding article published on the Internet, *Business Versus Family Model of Leadership: Understanding the Leadership Paradigm in the Small Church*. He points out the vast differences of the two models of leadership and why the family model of leadership works best in the small church.

While the business model of leadership manages by *objectives*, the small church leadership model manages by *relationships*. The former looks for measurable accomplishments, the number of baptisms, the average attendance in Sunday school, and the dollars in the offering plate. The latter is far more concerned with the quality of the relationships within the church rather than its size. Daman continues,

A decision, no matter how significant or beneficial, will be rejected if it is perceived to undermine or threaten the unity within the community. The decision to replace the organ with a keyboard is not based upon the objective of reaching baby boomers, but how it will affect the family who donated the organ and the person who has been playing the organ for the past twenty years. (Daman 2005)

The two models of leadership clash in other significant areas as well. Today bookstores are filled to capacity with books on vision. Paul Meyer and Randy Slechta echo the drumbeat of leadership in this decade in their book *The 5 Pillars of Leadership*. “ . . . unless they (the leaders) have crystallized their thinking to develop a vision for the future of their organization, they cannot achieve success equal to their potential. When highly effective leaders have crystallized their thinking and know where they want the organization to go, they can then share those thought with the members of their team” (2003, 56).

Daman counters this concept as being effective in the small church,

In contrast, the small church often balks at any pastor who attempts to dictate the direction of the congregation. In the family model of leadership, any direction for the family is based upon input from the whole group, with each family member having a say in the matter. The role of the pastor is not to set the direction, but to help the congregation establish the direction they want to go. The people, not the pastor sets the vision for the congregation. The pastor is responsible to work with the various groups to implement that vision. In the small church they want a pastor who listens to their visions and dreams and works with them in achieving them. (Daman 2005)

In 1992, pollster George Barna’s book *The Power of Vision* hit the shelves and just as quickly flew off those shelves and into the hands of the pastors of America’s churches who were hungry for success. At last we had discovered why our churches were not growing and why we pastors were not as successful as the Warrens and the Hybels—we were lacking *vision*. He writes on page 28, “Vision for ministry is a clear mental

image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances.”

The new pastor, fresh out of seminary, unsure of himself yet armed with high expectations of his potential in ministry finishes unpacking the U-Haul on Saturday and ascends to the pulpit on Sunday. Assuming the people are counting on him for direction for the church he lays out the vision he has for this church. Instead of receiving a standing ovation at the close of the message, the people warmly welcome him there, ask about his getting settled in and graciously offer, “If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

Normally, the pastor goes home, delighted in the warm reception, yet a bit uneasy at the complete lack of enthusiasm for the vision he has so carefully crafted for the church. This unease carries forward into the administrative council meetings where they discuss the needing of paint for the hallway, the mowing of the grass, but say nothing about “the vision.” In fact when the pastor personally brings it to the table for discussion, regularly it is slid back into his lap in the classic rural/small town church method of death by neglect.

Too often, the pastor becomes frustrated with the church process and begins to let them know about it from the pulpit on Sundays. The response is noticeably cooler and some of the leadership does not even pass by him at the door after the service. He concludes that their problem is spiritual insensitivity and turns the affection for them down several degrees while he cranks up the intensity of proclaiming his vision. Finally, to accommodate him, the church gives a bit and he is delighted but usually not enough to hold him there when another call comes along. After he leaves the first thing the

congregation does is snap back to what they had always been doing. It is not that they are against vision, it is that they always do things together as a family.

This mindset is reflected in the decision making process of the rural/small town church. It is not a coincidence that the larger the church, the smaller the decision making board.

Within the smaller church, everyone is considered to have an equal voice and the congregation makes most of the decisions. The various boards make only minor decisions and then only after the congregation has carefully delineated what those decisions would be. The boards are responsible for researching the issues and bringing recommendations to the congregation, but it is the congregation who has the final say in the matter. Within the business model, decisions are made by the whole only when they affect the whole. In the family model, decisions are made by the whole even when they affect only a part. (Barna 1992, 28)

Oh the frustration this can bring to the novice pastor. Most people who have any board experience at all have served under the business model. The board makes the decision and the organization comes into line. Yet, in most rural/small town churches not only are the various boards reluctant to make final decisions, but they do so only after having carefully researched the reaction of the congregations by telephone, at the local coffee shop, at the hairdressers, or in the church parking lot. The political process takes on a whole new dimension in this atmosphere. The majority ruling philosophy, which most of Americans have placed along side of the Bible as authoritative decree, simply does not work in the rural/small town church. They work on the basis of consensus rule rather than majority rule. If you have to take a vote, you have probably already lost.

For the impatient "CEO Pastor" there is a sense that decisions are out of her hands completely. For the wise, experienced shepherd, this is a process that takes time but well worth the wait in calculating the final lasting results. In John 10:5 Jesus says that the sheep of his flock will never follow a stranger because they do not recognize a stranger's

voice. I was discussing pastoring with the pastor of the mega-church in California several years ago. He shared with me that he became tremendously depressed recently as he considered how bereft he was of relationships. He was the CEO of the church of several thousand people. He was the leader who oversaw the people who oversaw the flock. In some cases he was even more removed than that from the people of his congregation. He was in the office preparing the message to preach on Sunday, yet he knew few of them personally by name. Having experienced pastoring the rural/small town church, I could have guaranteed him he would have been even more frustrated in a position like that with his mindset of the CEO. "The small church wants a pastor who relates to them as individuals. They look for someone who will minister to them as a person rather than through programs. They want a leader who is approachable, who provides guidance and comfort through the struggles and daily pressures of life" (Daman 2005).

I was visiting in a small town church in Pennsylvania when a layperson asked to talk with me. She wanted to know what was being taught in our seminary. She said their last two pastors had come to the pulpit and quickly announced they would be pastoring differently than the church had probably been used to. The pastors had said they would be concentrating on the leading of the church and if the people wanted a visit while they were in the hospital, they would have to do it themselves. To the people of that congregation, it was as though they had no pastor and she wanted to know the reasoning behind such a weird philosophy of ministry.

I stumbled around a bit, muttered something about a misunderstanding, and excused myself without really giving a very good answer. I thought about it all the way home and later discussed it with others in the office and seminary. Finally, what emerged

was the stress at that time in ministerial training being the ministry of the laity. It was an excellent concept. The idea was that as long as the pastor does the entire ministry, the laity simply sits on the shelf and is not strengthened or trained in their role of ministry. The idea is valuable and necessary, but the delivery system came by proclamation, not process. Had the pastors simply quietly invited an elder or deacon to make hospital visits with him a few times, had they asked for an occasional assistance for some of the ministry, they would have accomplished the goal without creating the offense.

Not having to be a manager does have advantages to the pastor of the rural/small town church, however. She can spend her time more on ministry than on programs. With the success of the church evaluated on the spiritual growth of the individual rather than the “nickels and noses” paradigm, one-on-one time in the barn during milking time is not wasted hours but treasured moments. The concept of church work refocuses back to the true focus of doing the work of the church—bearing fruit.

Two stories will be appropriate here of successful rural/small town pastors. In southeastern Missouri stands a beautiful church that was pastored by Lawrence Winich. I am not sure what kind of a preacher he was; no one ever commented on that aspect of his ministry to me. But I know what kind of a pastor he was, for everyone who knew him talks about that. He began pastoring at the Crossroads Church of God when there were hardly enough people to even have a church. But the church began to grow. It seems that Pastor Winich would go out into the community to help. One mother in the congregation told him that her son and daughter-in-law would be in church but they are too busy remodeling their kitchen. The pastor, with some experience in carpentry, showed up at the son's home the next night with his tools. He introduced himself and told them he had

heard they were tackling a big job. He offered to help. Every night for weeks, the pastor made his way back to the little house and family. They worked on the kitchen and he worked on their souls as well. Over the weeks that followed the family was introduced to Jesus Christ and committed their lives to Him. Later they discovered they did not have to work on Sunday after all and became active members of that rural/small town church. This came as the result of no special program or campaign but simply from a relationship demonstrating love in action.

A similar story was told to me by Becky Binkley Montgomery about her father, Carl. Carl was called to pastor the Mt. Carroll Church of God in a small town in Illinois. The church was ingrown to the point it was not a very pleasant place for new people to visit, which seemed to suit the powers in charge just fine. This was the day when electricity was just getting out into the rural areas. Pastor Binkley understood that many of the farmers did not know how to hook into the electricity to use in their houses and farms. Every day he would travel up and down the rural gravel roads and lanes, stopping at the houses to offer his services. Obviously, he was welcomed *everywhere*. He would work and he would minister. Sunday by Sunday new families came to the church pastored by their electrician despite the cool reception of the old timers. The day came when there were more new than old attending. Some of the old left angrily as their “club” was no longer their “club.” Today the Mt. Carroll Church of God is thriving because there was a pastor who understood the necessity for relationships in the rural/small town church.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

#### **Introduction**

“You know, I’ve just heard the most unique response from a pastor recently,” mused Dr. Ricky Mason, the Director of the Allegheny Conference of the Churches of God, General Conference. “Joe Wingrove said as they continue to grow at the Breakneck/Clinton Circuit, he hoped we would not divide the circuit but rather add an assistant to the circuit instead.”

Thinking “outside the box” is not always radical, adversarial change causing conflict and turmoil, sometimes it is doing the unexpected that causes everyone to stop and say, “I wonder why he said that.” And more, “I wonder why I did not think of that?” So came my introduction to the Breakneck/Clinton Circuit and its pastor, Joe Wingrove.

#### **Groundwork**

My first connection to the Breakneck/Clinton Church circuit came in 2001. Jack Sparks, a leader at the Breakneck Church, was selling tickets to a spaghetti dinner at the Allegheny Conference’s annual meeting. Teasingly, I chided him for scheduling the dinner the following weekend as I could not come back for it. Jack took me seriously and I discovered they rescheduled the dinner the following year to the Saturday evening following the conference meeting so I *could* join them. By the time the word reached me, I was already scheduled to preach the next morning at a church located on the other end

of the state. Attending the dinner was important enough for me to eat supper with them and then drive 200 miles to my motel. It was worth the extra effort as I saw a circuit men's group serving their community with cohesiveness and obvious enjoyment.

The following year I visited the Breakneck church one Sunday morning, unannounced for the worship service to worship and to experience personally the "feel" of the congregation. I wanted to see the congregation in context, before any concrete plans of a project could distort my perception in any way (Ammerman 1998, 42 ff). The atmosphere that morning was electric and the enthusiastic greetings suggested these people had not seen each other in years rather than just a week. Love was everywhere.

As I began to plan this project, I telephoned Pastor Joe Wingrove, the pastor of the Breakneck/Clinton Church of God circuit, inviting him to meet me for lunch at a local fast food restaurant. I complimented him on the steady growth of the churches he pastors and began outlining what I hoped to accomplish in my project.

Joe was elated both from the fact I was not there to recall his credentials and close the churches, and because I was going to embark on such a study. He affirmed, "Small churches like ours have a sense that they do not really matter to their denomination. A study like this made by our Executive Director will encourage them tremendously."

We spent the next hour and a half discussing his background, the churches and their current status, and his philosophy of ministry. All of this provided me with an excellent background for my coming research.

Based upon these observations I wrote a proposal for my project. I sent it to Pastor Wingrove and asked him to present it to the Administrative Council of each

church asking their permission to make the study and give me the freedom to delve into their historic records (Bell 1999, 45-46). Both of these were quickly given.

### **Demographics**

I began to comb the Internet sites for census information about Fayette County Pennsylvania and, more specifically, Bullskin Township in that county. This was the geographical area of the churches I would be studying.

I examined population trends, economic trends, and aging trends to give insight into the direction the area was moving according to the demographic signaling. I studied comparison figures to the rest of the state in the areas of education, racial mix, and income per household. In order to give me a comparative perspective of the area, I also studied these factors in Findlay, Ohio, the region in which I have lived during the past twelve years.

Other demographic trends I examined were the measurable physical trends of the churches themselves. I studied the trends in attendance and giving for the past ten years of the Breakneck and Clinton churches. I also studied these figures for the Buchanan Church, a church that had been part of the circuit for nearly 30 years prior to becoming a stand-alone charge in the mid 1990's.

### **Visits and Meetings**

Finally, I scheduled a visit to each of the churches in the fall of 2005. By scheduling them close to the same time, I believed I could better grasp the continuity in the two churches or lack thereof. By having separate weekends, it would give me time to assimilate the data from one church before dealing with the other one.

Fortunately, I had been scheduled to speak at the Buchanan Church's centennial celebration a short time before these weekends. As a providential surprise, I was able to discuss the churches with the previous pastor, Tim Beatty, who was the pastor of the entire circuit before its dissolution. This event had proven to be the crux of the greatest turmoil the churches had experienced in the previous century.

### **Leadership Focus Groups**

As I laid out the agenda for the visits, I determined to mine the greatest amount of pertinent material in the shortest amount of time. I felt a meeting with the leadership of the churches, their Administrative Councils, would be an absolute necessity to grasp their understanding and reactions to the transformation of their churches from a "near death" experience to an aura of healthy growth. It would be necessary to learn how their roles changed or did not change. I wanted to learn what their plans were for the sustained steady growth of their churches in the future. In that regard, I would seek to discover if there was any transitioning taking place from the old leadership to the new and from the older generation to the younger one. If there was, I would seek to discover their attitude with regard to such a transition. I planned to do this by means of using these leaders as a focus group in each of the two churches (Ammerman 1998, 83). A Saturday morning session worked best for this kind of meeting. As it turned out, Pastor Wingrove had other plans for each of the Saturdays I would be there and wondered if he needed to attend the Saturday sessions. While not originally planned, this worked to the project's advantage, freeing the members of the leadership to be direct and somewhat uninhibited in their responses to my questions. This meeting was held on Saturday morning on each of the weekends and was attended by all the members of the Administrative Councils who

could possibly do so. I sensed a real eagerness in both of the churches to tell the story of what was happening in their churches.

### **Individual Interviews**

I felt it would be also important to gain the perspective of individuals in the congregations in a more in-depth manner with individual interviews (Ammerman 1998, 83). I asked the pastor to set up interviews with four people from each of the churches. I asked that they be a mix of old and young, men and women, long-time members and newer attendees as well. I was delighted in how well this mixture was carried out. I was able to interview a woman who was born in the area, a descendent of one of the founding families and still very active in the church in her late 80's. At the other end of the age spectrum was a lady in her early 30's with a family and small children. New converts and old saints were represented as well.

I interviewed these people after the meetings with the leadership over the noon hour. The interviews were about a half-hour in duration and I tape recorded them for accuracy and completeness. I designed my questions to discover their perspective on what was taking place at their church. I sought facts where applicable, opinions, and even impressions on occasion. To gain honest answers, when I noticed an occasional glance at the tape recorder I would quickly assure them of the confidentiality of their answers. Using what *Studying Congregations* would call "semistructured interviews," I directed the interviews for the most part but I was not at all rigid in the process giving them much latitude to insert stories, family history, and community lore in the process (Ammerman 1998, 206). The information gained in this way revealed many of the core values of the congregation. They also enabled me to work backwards to discover what in the culture of

the church caused these opinions to be formed. I probed into the spiritual frame of reference of each person in a way that I felt was non-threatening. I asked where his or her own spiritual growth was coming from, about his or her spiritual giftedness, and about his or her personal walk with Christ. I also connected this to the church in asking what areas of the ministry of the church were most effective in his or her life.

### **Congregational Surveys**

I wanted to gain information from the entire congregation (Bell 1999, 13). I had the options of either personally contacting each attendee by mail or telephone or to ask for time in the worship service to conduct a survey. Obviously, the latter would be preferred as it would both ensure the time necessary for the survey and also by collecting the surveys immediately would be assured of receiving the results in a timely manner.

I designed this survey seeking “to obtain information which can be analysed [*sic*] and patterns extracted and comparisons made” (Bell 1999, 13). My questions were focused on the “What? Where? When? and How?” (Bell 1999, 14). Overall, I was using the survey questions to discover measurable things like the make-up of the congregation with regard to age, involvement, family connections, and financial support. Contrary to Bell’s advice, I inserted the following open ended “Why?” question: “Briefly write what you feel the number one reason this church is growing?” (Bell 1999, 14). I did this because of the pertinence of that issue to my project and because the sample would be small enough that compilation of the responses would not be overwhelming. (Appendix A.)

I was graciously given ten minutes to give this survey during the worship service in each of the churches. I briefly explained my purpose, passed out the surveys, asked

them to fill them out and pass them to the center aisle, where I picked them up. Having been a pastor for thirty years, I anticipated some of the congregation would refuse to comply. There was only one family who would not take the questionnaire. They told me later that they were from Texas and were only visiting that Sunday. Virtually every other person in attendance willingly participated. I was surprised and much impressed with this attitude of cooperation.

### **Congregational Interaction Meetings**

To complete my understanding of the two churches, I designed an open meeting for any in the congregation who would be willing to come in to tell me about their church. This gathering we scheduled on Friday evening from seven o'clock until about 9:30 p.m.

The purpose of this meeting was twofold. First, I wanted to observe the dynamics of the congregation firsthand (Ammerman 1998, 105 ff.). How would they relate to each other? How would they handle differences of opinion? Who would come? Would there be a sense of freedom or constraint? Things like this can best be understood by attending the church for a long period of time. With only a few days at my disposal, I concluded that an open meeting like this would give me the most opportunity to observe these dynamics.

At each of these gatherings the church had prepared light snacks that opened the door for fellowship. I taped a large piece of paper to the wall on which to construct a time-line of the history of the church. I had an assortment of felt pens to color code various items of information. Things that needed to be emphasized were written in one

color; the good and the not-good were color-coded; and the physical and spiritual were pointed out as such.

I began the discussion with the wide open question, "Tell me about your church." From there I began constructing the time-line of the church (Ammerman 1998, 43-47). This prompted lively interaction as to what should be included and what should not be included. There were facts that were understood differently by various people involved. I had the sense that this was the first time that some of these issues had ever been openly discussed among them. Naturally, when we came to the last quarter of a century, there was much pain still in evidence over some of the events. The verbal responses testified to this and the body language confirmed its validity.

I listened not only to the words but also observed the atmosphere, carefully noting the "hot buttons," that elicited more emotion than would normally be expected. I observed how intense the disagreements were and how differences were resolved. There was an obvious amiable spirit in those churches.

One unexpected result was the difference between the two churches in this meeting. I suspect the announcements were similar, but the attendance numbers were strikingly dissimilar. At the Breakneck Church the room was filled with people, while at the Clinton Church there were less than ten in attendance. Certainly, part of the difference can be explained by other activities conflicting with the schedule at the latter church, but listening to the comments by the pastor and those who did attend indicated that the number of those who came was about what they expected. It was also interesting to note that the group that came on Friday evening to the Clinton meeting was almost identical to those who were in attendance the following morning in the leadership meeting.

I tape recorded the Friday evening and Saturday morning meetings. I also took written notes as the room was too large to always be able to understand what was being said. Following the Friday evening meeting at Clinton, I was invited to the pastor's home where we discussed our observations from the meeting. It was an excellent time of filling in gaps to the discussion.

### **Immediate Reflection**

On both trips I stayed in a motel. Immediately, upon returning back to my room I wrote a report of the meetings I had attended and the interviews I had conducted while they were fresh in my mind. I left a pad of paper beside the bed and found myself processing the data of the day all night long. Occasionally, I would awaken, switch on the light, and record fresh observations so as not to forget them. In the morning, I found that these were some of the most insightful observations of my visit!

### **Event Attendance**

Saturday evening at Breakneck Church, I discovered they were again hosting a community-wide spaghetti supper and, recognizing a unique opportunity to observe the church in the community, I quickly volunteered to help. My role was to serve the dessert. This freed me up to interact with people in the community who did not attend the church. I was able to see the relationship among the people in the church with each other and with those who came in from outside. During the dinner a group from the Clinton Church came in. I watched the interaction between the people of the two churches on the circuit and the interaction between these people and the people in the Breakneck Community. It

was here that I gained great insight why the concept of merging churches together usually does not work.

### **Document Examination**

I asked for an opportunity to look at the minutes for as far back as they had them in each church. I received the records from Breakneck dating back to the early 1930's (Ammerman 1998, 210 ff.). I read excerpts from these notes into my tape recorder for speed and accuracy. I sought information that would give me insight into decisions that formed them as a body. I studied deliberations that were included to understand the way the leadership had worked historically. The budgeting process or apparent lack of such prompted me to ask questions, which gave insight into the way the church viewed money.

The Clinton Church searched its history and returned with a very thin notebook that contained various and sundry notes and records of events of their past. I suspect the reason was that this was all they could locate. Written records are not always as significant in the rural/small town church where everyone knows everything anyway. Contrary to this mindset are the rural/small town churches that manage to keep records of virtually everything that happens in the church. I have seen records going back decades relating things as minute as what songs were sung in a Sunday school and who it was that led in prayer that morning! I suspect that there were records to be found had I looked hard enough, but the fact that they could not immediately lay their hands on them said much about their decision making process as well.

### **Sunday Worship Service**

In each of the churches I worshipped with them on Sunday. There was an eagerness to greet me on the part of those who had taken part in my visit to that point. Some wanted to tell me of things they had forgotten to say in the interviews or meetings. Others encouraged me, indicating that they were eagerly anticipating reading the finished product.

### **Recording and Organizing the Results of the Visits**

I returned to my office and immediately began bringing both the written and tape recorded notes together to form a complete record of the visit.

I do anticipate going back to these churches when the project is completed to share with them the insights I have gained in this process. They have been vulnerable and valuable to my project. I owe them a great deal of gratitude, as do those who profit from the findings of this project.

Having all of the data before me, I next began organizing the material. I labeled the material in the following manner:

“D” for demographics

“F” for facilities

“C” for culture

“CT” for circuit thinking

“FO” for focus

“CO” for community

“M” for money

“P” for pastoral leadership

“T” for transition

“S” for spirituality

These then formed the basis for writing Chapter Five, the analysis of the data. I divided the material of that chapter into ten sections:

1. Demographics
2. Facilities
3. Culture
4. Circuit Thinking
5. Community
6. Focus
7. Decision Making and Money
8. Pastoral Leadership
9. Transition of Leadership
10. Spirituality

CHAPTER FIVE  
ANALYSIS OF DATA

**Demographics**

The Clinton/Breakneck circuit of the Churches of God, General Conference, is nestled in the northern part of Fayette County, in southwest Pennsylvania. It sits about five to ten miles north of Connellsville and fifty miles southeast of Pittsburgh. Fayette County has a largely Caucasian population (95.3%) with the area in which the churches are located being totally white from my observation. Seventy-six percent of those over 25 years of age are high school graduates compared to a state percentage of 81.9. The gap widens as those with bachelor's degrees or higher compares 11.5% to a statewide total of 22.4%.

Fayette County is a financially depressed region. Recent census facts indicate its *per capita* money income is currently \$15,274 compared to the state figure of \$20,880 and 18% of her residents are living below the poverty level in comparison to 11% of the residents of the state of Pennsylvania doing so.

The population of the county has shown a significant outflow of 8.8% in the last 25 years. The population, as could be expected, seems to be following the jobs elsewhere. While Connellsville and its neighbor Uniontown were at one time the coke capitals of the world, changes in the steel manufacturing process and new restrictions on coal burning and mining, left the largely one commodity community struggling for survival.

This conclusion is underscored by the aging of the communities. Between 1980 and 2000 the percentage of those 65 years of age and over grew from 14% of the population to over 18% while those 18 years of age and under dropped from 37% to 25% of the population. The community is in double decline; it is not only shrinking in numbers, but the ratio of those who remained there is growing older.

A community with a declining population that is aging and beset with depressed economic conditions is hardly one where you would expect to see churches in a growth mode. Yet, the Breakneck Church of God has moved from an average worship attendance of 51 in 1994 to 96 in 2004 and the Clinton Church of God has grown from an average of 41 in their worship service to 68. Together they have grown from 92 to 164 or 78% in eleven years. Is what is happening here an anomaly or is it something reproducible in other similar situations? *Why are these rural/small churches thriving while others are only striving?*

### **Facilities**

The Clinton Church is a brick structure standing on the highest point in the area at the crossroads of their community. The sanctuary seats about 100 and was built in 1965. The basement has limited space for Sunday school, fellowship, and bathrooms. In 1980, they built a fellowship hall across the main road with bathrooms, a kitchen, and a large open space for meetings and social gatherings.

Historically, the location is important because at one time the land on which the fellowship hall is now built was the site of the community's former general store. Everyone in the community did their shopping at that store in the early days. People would meet each other there and socialize and connect. Another of the corners of the

intersection had been the site of the local school. Over the years, this intersection had been the center of the community and the church now seems to be retaking that center focus with their buildings, programs, and ministry.

The Clinton church continues to upgrade their building having added a ramp for the handicapped in 2002 after one of their members had a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair. They are currently erecting a structure to house bathrooms on the level of the sanctuary. They pointed out that the new bathrooms will not only be handicapped accessible but will also have baby changing stations . . . a sure sign the church is not only concerned about the older people but the younger ones as well.

The Breakneck Church is a wood frame structure built in 1887 but is continually being enlarged. In 1957, they purchased the local school building located about 300 yards further down the road. Between the two buildings are parking lots and two private homes. This too, was and continues to be the center focus of the community. They are also continuing to upgrade their facilities. As I write they are digging into the large hill behind the church building in order to provide additional much-needed parking.

It is important to realize how valuable the two non-worshipping buildings have become to these churches. The Churches of God, General Conference (CGGC) leadership of the past century followed the text 1 Corinthians 11:21 literally. "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?" This was written in the context as an admonishment to those who were using the Lord's Supper to gorge themselves selfishly on the bread and the cup and it was that concern and not the location of the supper with which Paul was dealing. Yet, they interpreted it to be an admonishment not to eat in the church building. It was upon this misinterpretation that many of the CGGC churches built in that era were built

without kitchens, effectively short-circuiting the fellowship of the churches around food. Now, with the addition of these buildings with kitchen and dining facilities, the fellowship of the churches was greatly enhanced.

The second buildings were originally acquired or built primarily for the use of the church itself. These buildings house not only church programs like Vacation Bible School, Pioneer Clubs, but also all church functions like dinners and meetings. It was only later that they grasped the potential these structures had for outreach into the community. Currently, the congregations have opened their doors for major community events like fund-raising dinners, wedding receptions, and family funeral dinners. They not only open their buildings to people in the community on a freewill offering basis, but also graciously prepare funeral meals for the families of their neighbors. The fact that they are the only large meeting rooms for miles has drawn the entire community in their direction.

The church physical properties, while not ostentatious, are kept neat and clean showing the obvious pride of the congregation. The large pile of dirt during this time of erecting the addition at the Clinton church also testifies of a sense of life and growth within the church to the community.

### **Culture**

The Breakneck church was started in 1887 and the Clinton church began about 30 years later. Both of the churches were parts of various circuits as far back as anyone can remember. The church mix on their circuit varied over the years with as many as ten churches being on the circuit at one time. It was in 1967 that Clinton and Breakneck

became a circuit with the Buchanan Church of God. This was a circuit which would continue for nearly three decades.

Also of significance is the location of the three churches. The Buchanan and Clinton churches are “on the mountain” and are only two miles apart. The Breakneck church is five miles from the Clinton church and is down in the valley. To me, an outsider, this is just distance but to the natives it is much more than that. To begin with, there is a vast difference in weather patterns. One of the evenings I visited the Clinton church, the fog rolled in and I had to inch my way down the road for two miles when suddenly the fog lifted and everything immediately became visible. I have been told that there have been times when it was snowing on the mountain and the sun was shining in the valley, something the pastor must know when the call comes to cancel or delay services due to weather. Actually, they seldom do that, in that the majority of those hardy souls in the mountain church have access to four-wheel drive vehicles and refuse to let the weather control them.

Secondly and closely tied to the above truth, the mountain people are by culture far more independent than their valley counterparts. In his famous study of the Appalachian culture, Kai Erikson writes,

Mountain life is the natural enemy of formalism anyway. It is a world of sharp and impending realities. It helps breed a social order without philosophy or art of even the rudest form of letters. It brings out whatever capacity for superstition and credulity a people come endowed with, and it encourages an almost reckless individualism. . . . the mountains also separate people into isolated hollows where they have little choice but to rely upon their own individual resources. It stands to reason, then, that the early homesteaders would become even more detached than they already were from old denominational connections and that their spiritual longings would become more personalized and internalized, more emotional and episodic. (1976, 60-61)

It is not surprising that the pastor wears a formal robe at Breakneck while at Clinton, they “tolerate” a tie! These Clinton “detached” people are necessarily more tightly bound to the limited community they do have. In one of our meetings at the Clinton church Shawn Striner emphatically declared that this church IS her family! The corresponding danger of this is that this attitude can easily slip into an exclusivity that will stifle outreach. This “family” attitude seemed to be stressed more at the Clinton church. In the congregational questionnaire about half of the people gave credit to the love, friendliness, and warmth of the congregation as the biggest reason they were growing—second only to those crediting the pastor. I think it is significant that along with this several of the Clinton church mentioned the “family feeling” that drew people to the church. To the mountain people, once you have their friendship you are family and they will go to the wall for you. On the other hand, if you offend them, they tend to have very long memories and it is extremely hard to ever again regain their confidence.

The children in the valley attend different elementary schools than do the children on the mountain. Their sense of humor is different. Pastor Wingrove relates that he tells the same humorous story at Clinton and later at Breakneck and receives an entirely different response. He believed that it was not that one congregation had a sense of humor and the other one did not, but that they expressed their enjoyment much differently. Five miles separates two distinct cultures.

### **Circuit Thinking**

There are many in the church world and beyond who simply cannot understand the problems facing the rural/small town church. They understand that there is a shortage of pastors and easily grasp that the expense of hiring a full-time pastor with the full

complement of salary and benefits is beyond the ability of these churches to meet individually. To them the solution would be to take two or three of these struggling churches, put them together making one church in one building with one pastor and all of the problems would appear to be solved. The need for two pastors is halved. The cost of keeping two buildings maintained and heated is reduced. The number of people to share the cost is doubled. They wonder why we are making this situation so difficult.

The Breakneck/Clinton circuit would seem to be an ideal test case for such a move. The churches already have the same pastor whom they both love dearly. They are both a part of the same denomination and have been for the past hundred years. They have a history of working together in a circuit and do seem to get along together well. Yet when I broached the merging idea with them it received a cool, no, a *cold* reception in both churches!

Their first line of reasoning was the practical. They would have to build a new building and the Breakneck Church's deed had a clause in it saying that the church building would revert back to its original owners if it ever ceased to be a church. As I continued to probe, more substantial reasons began to emerge. Each of the churches had their own history and each had their own story. While they knew and appreciated each other, that in and of itself was not sufficient reason to become a single church. It was almost as if two people in the same community who both had financial problems should solve that problem by getting married on that basis alone.

Unspoken, but certainly a factor that must have entered into their reasoning, were the differences in cultures described in the section above. To force such issues would be tantamount to pounding a square peg into a round hole.

My follow-up question on this subject concerned any desire they had to become single pastor, stand-alone churches. The response from both churches was the same, "No, we like each other and believe there are advantages to the arrangement we now have." They went on to relate how they have helped each other over the years and how having a larger group of people has enabled them to do things that a smaller group simply could not accomplish such as a united men's group and youth activities. They have begun a united Pioneer Ministries kid's club and have talked about combining the training and materials for their Vacation Bible School.

### **Community**

As noted in Chapter Three, the rural/small town church is relationship oriented. This is a double-edged sword. On the positive side the church is the place to go to meet people, renew acquaintances, and to catch up on the latest community information. There is the negative side, however, that tends to more typify these rural/small town organisms. It is where the exclusiveness that comes from these same relationships can easily begin to grow. As the population declines with people moving from the area, the attendance and the income of the church naturally follow suit. When Sunday after Sunday there are more empty seats than the previous week, a siege mentality begins to pervade the church community. Fear of loss to the point of extinction causes the people in these churches to tighten their relationships with each other. As the community shrinks in size the connections with each other proportionately deepen. This in itself is not the problem but in the strengthening of the relationships there all too easily comes an exclusivity that alienates the new people who visit the church—the very people the church needs to have come and join with them if they are to survive. So comments from the inside warmly

Normally, the rural/small town church takes time to begin to trust a pastor. Some experienced pastors of rural/small town churches have concluded that it takes at least five years to lay the groundwork for an effective ministry: the first two years the congregation is getting over the previous pastor and only in the next three years do they began to test your validity and determine whether or not to trust you (Klassen and Koessler 1996, 35). In an interview with Tim Beatty, the pastor of the Buchanan church, he said it took about seven years before he really believed they trusted him. This would be considered to be at least the norm although it is true that some pastors are never trusted by their congregation no matter how long they pastor a church.

When I asked those in the Clinton and Breakneck churches when they began trusting Joe, they gave me the impression that they had trusted him right from the start. Perhaps that was because he lived in the area and they knew him, or more likely, he came when they believed no one would.

2. *Given the fact that churches are not merely social institutions but intensely spiritual in nature, what things were done in the spiritual realm to infuse this new change? To the church itself: was there a prayer emphasis; a period of fasting; discipleship training; a time of personal introspection and revival? To those outside of the church: was there a renewed stress on evangelism; ministering to the physical, social, and moral needs of the community, programs to bridge the gap between the church and the world with encouragement like Friendship Sundays, special social affairs like picnics and community celebrations?*

Prayer seems to be a “way of life” in these two churches. When I asked the place of prayer in their church, there response was borderline indignation: “Of course we

pray!” As I talked with the various people in the churches, stories of answered prayer came easily and naturally. Their large prayer list of nearly 150 names included in the weekly bulletin is at once a bulletin board of the condition of people in their community, as well as being serious concerns for these people that were then taken to God in prayer. Included in this list were other churches and pastors as well. They do have a prayer chain, which I concluded was an active entity not simply a structure in order to be able to say we have “a prayer chain.”

Outreach into the community by love has replaced the old-time “Revival Meetings” that was the usual method used by previous generations in that area. They distributed video copies of the “Jesus” film to every home in the community. After the disaster of 9/11 they held a community-wide prayer service. Their Easter weekend is a huge celebration with plans that include involving the entire community into the church for that time.

Drawing people to a personal relationship with the Savior is led in an unforced, natural way by the pastor. As was alluded to earlier, one of the elders of the Clinton church remarked, “. . . the pastor visits the hospital. Then the people he visits come to the church and are ready to accept Him.” A neighbor to the Breakneck church testified that when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and Pastor Joe came to visit. “He converted me. I was baptized, and joined the church. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I can’t speak enough of him.” Another neighbor of Pastor Joe relates that when they had called an ambulance to take him to the hospital, Joe came down and had prayer with him. The man is now an active part of the Breakneck church. There were many other such

speak of the friendliness of the people while comments from the outside reflect a coldness that long-time members simply cannot fathom.

While this fear of extinction was real in both of the two churches in this study to some extent, their response was quite different than what is normally expected. In 1996, the three-church circuit of Clinton/Breakneck/Buchanan that had been functioning together for thirty years suddenly dissolved. The Buchanan Church opted out of the circuit to become a stand-alone parish with the pastor of the circuit becoming exclusively theirs. With little warning one-third of the circuit's population and income was gone. With loaded words like "betrayal" and "desertion" filling the air as the Breakneck leadership described the situation, I probed as to why they just did not throw their hands in the air, give up, and close the churches.

Jack Sparks, an elder at the Breakneck Church, put their response in succinct and revealing words, "Well, we decided that Breakneck needed to have a church and that the Clinton Church could not be deserted at a time like this." In short, Jack was saying that it was not *about them* but about the Kingdom. Jack, well past retirement years, did not need the added stress that would be placed on his shoulders by picking up the extra responsibilities of forming a new circuit. He could easily have driven to another larger church where he could simply have enjoyed his remaining years and no one would have blamed him in the least. With his long history of dedicated service, he certainly had earned such a break. His logic was not self-focused but directed toward his surrounding community and nearby body of believers that needed the Breakneck Church.

As I talked with the various individuals and groups I became convinced that this was a valid representation of the mindset of these two churches. They do love their

community. Their DNA is “community” through and through. By enlarging their scope of relationships to include an entire community, they refuse to allow the walls of relationship exclusivity to form in their congregations.

Their relationship to their community is reflected in many ways. Perhaps the one that stands out to the visitor to the worship service is the bulletin. The prayer list inserted in the bulletin includes the requests and needs of both churches. The list can only be described as massive with 146 names included. With a prayer list of this magnitude in a church with only around 60 attendees, it is obvious that their concerns extend far beyond their own membership. It is highly probable that a visitor from the community might find his name or the name of a member of her family on that list and instantly feel a part of the body. The prayer list is divided into five categories: “Ongoing Prayer Needs; Service Personnel; In Hospital; Bereavement; and Current Needs.” There is a note at the top of the list, “Needs other than Ongoing removed after a few weeks, please reaffirm in sharing.”

This sharing time is a second illustration of community concerns. This is “community time” in the worship service to update the church and the entire community of what has been happening: who was released from the hospital; who was admitted, to what hospital, and their condition; who had passed away in the community and what were the funeral arrangements; who had their baby, the sex of the baby, its name, and of course how much it weighed. Currently, there is often a report from any who have heard from Iraq and the troops from their community over there. A pastor who comes in from outside such a community normally has little personal involvement with this time and can easily label it as merely “gossip time.” She feels like she is at a family reunion of another

family—very out of place. The normal tendency for such a pastor is often to eliminate this section of the service as relatively unimportant in her desire to “streamline” the program.

Is this sharing of news gossip? I asked the leadership and they kind of nodded and hung their heads as if I had just exposed their unpardonable transgression. It was then that Pastor Joe spoke up: “Yes, gossip is here. But it is not always wrong. Sometimes you tell good things!” Everyone laughed a bit in relief. As the conversation continued it became obvious that they felt that sharing news was not really gossip if it was not malicious. It was rather community building as this was more of keeping everyone up to date on happenings within the community rather than just spreading private confidential information.

The worship service virtually exudes community. The sign on the bulletin board in front announces the absence of a dress code with the words, “Come as You Are!” Entering the sanctuary you find that the room is filled with the sounds of people greeting each other and obviously enjoying the fellowship. In the Clinton church one man moves up and down the aisle with a bag filled with lifesaver mints offering one to each person. They take the gift and thank him. He is obviously pleased with his special role in the church.

The worship service itself has a pleasing formality to it. I suspect marketers would refer to it as *formal-lite*. There is the acolyte lighting the candles and the well-orchestrated order of service yet it is anything but a routine. “The Call to Worship” is fresh and meaningful and truly does what it promises in calling us to worship.

The "Peace" is then shared in a more physical way as there is another time of greeting each other. While there is a little hesitancy to greet the largely unknown visitor from Findlay, generally, all are made to feel welcomed to the church. This time is extensive but it underlines the relationships that are so vital to that ministry.

Continuing the order of service together with the involvement of the congregation there then comes a time of singing hymns and choruses as suggested by those in attendance. This is a bit chaotic to those who are not used to it, but obviously a dearly loved feature by members of the church.

The "Moments with our Children" time of the service follows with Pastor Joe. The morning I attended this time was a mini-drama dealing with the parable of the talents from Matthew 25. Children were allowed to be children and eagerly take it all in. There was laughter as the young man with ten talents (bag full of money) excitedly responds, "Now, I can buy a car!" The congregation laughs with him.

To illustrate this family feeling further I visited the Clinton church on Pentecost Sunday. The children's message was focused naturally upon the birth of the church. Pastor Joe even had a birthday cake and lit the candles on it. After the story he allowed a boy of about ten years of age to blow out the candles. These were obviously not normal candles as one by one they relit themselves. The poor young man blew until he could blow no more and finally Joe snuffed them out only after adding to his message that though the enemy would like to put out the light of the church, he is unable to do so. The people enjoyed the message, as usual, as much or more than the children did.

Only later did the illustration take on a life of its own. The young man who had attempted to blow out the candles was also the acolyte for that service. At the conclusion

of the service, he dutifully made his way to the front to extinguish the flames on the candles on the communion table. For whatever reason, one of the candles refused to go out! You could almost feel every person in the congregation straining to put out that candle! The poor boy turned around desperately looking for some help. A teenager quickly moved to the front and put out the rebellious candle. The response was a family like response as the congregation patted the young man encouragingly afterwards as we all laughed together. As I drove out of the parking lot after the service was over, I thought of how smoothly that had gone and wondered how that would have been handled in a perfection-minded mega-church setting.

An illustration of the informality and mixture of style came one Sunday as I visited the Breakneck church. The choir sang an excellent and moving rendition of the classic "Be Still My Soul" by Katharina A. von Schlegel. This was immediately followed by the congregation singing the old Sunday school chorus, "Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah, Praise Ye the Lord!" Why? Pastor Joe smiled, "The people enjoy that style."

Worship is done properly and in order but if a child cries out, no one is particularly bothered. The worshiper realizes the church is there to worship God, not to worship the service.

Another evidence of the community awareness of these churches is their lack of significant barriers to people coming in. There is no sense of who is "in" and who is "out" regarding membership that I could perceive. Admittedly nuances like this would probably not be picked up in one service, even if one is looking to find it. Certainly, those who "belong" are well known in the community and it is likely that the community has its own "church membership list." I interviewed Randy Keffer who lives in nearby

Normalville. As he talked in glowing terms about attending the Breakneck church he said, "When people ask me what church I go to? Without hesitation I tell them the Breakneck Church of God. They know and all seem to approve." He said it was kind of nice to attend a church like that.

John Richter has lived across the road from the Breakneck church for 47 years without ever attending. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Pastor Joe visited him and led him into a relationship with the Savior. Understanding the rural/small town mindset of not allowing people to change, I asked John if it was difficult now to walk across that road to church. "Not at all," came his response, "I've known these people all my life."

A question I asked repeatedly was, "Where is this growth coming from?" We like to believe that churches get all of their growth from conversions, from winning the lost to the Savior. Reality is less idealistic than that. Some churches grow because a nearby church has problems and the disgruntled members go out to find a new place of worship. Some churches grow when a new, dynamic preacher arrives on the scene or a new director of music opens new vistas of meaningful worship modes. Growth has been known to come from a new factory moving into the area or a new military base opening.

These congregations seemed perplexed when I asked the question. Where are they coming from? "Here! Where else?" The congregational survey figures bear this out with 73% of each congregation driving less than five miles to church. People who came sporadically began to come regularly. Some, like John Richter, had never come but through some contact with the church and the church family began to attend. There simply is no observable "them and us" mentality in the churches. Rather, the attitude is

“those who come regularly” and “those who soon will begin coming regularly!” The church belongs to the community and the community feels ownership of the church.

An interesting comment was made as we talked about growth. One lady adamantly asserted that she did not want the church to grow. When probed, she clarified her answer by saying it means much to her to have her pastor speak to her by name as he passes communion to her. She never wants the church to grow to the point that this no longer happens. In fact, she seems to be saying that she never wants it to grow to the place that the church loses its sense of community.

In a conversation with Ricky Mason, Jack Sparks, one of the elders of Breakneck, responded with what he thought the reason that the church was doing so well. His response was telling: “I think one of the reasons is because we hear nothing about all of these church growth programs. They are never even mentioned.” His point was that growth for growth’s sake was not the main thing they were aiming for as a congregation. This kind of growth would work in opposition to their concern for relationships and community. Their goal is not having more people in the pews but building the community. Yet, interestingly, building a solid community is tremendously attractive and does produce growth, but as an *outcome* rather than the *motivation*.

Community concern is not limited to the Sunday morning worship service. The churches are deeply concerned about the financial needs of their community – an important matter in an economically depressed area with fewer and fewer jobs available.

During the pastoral prayer, concern is voiced for those going into the winter season with the high heating bills. Children without coats find that the churches have

joined with other community agencies to meet this need. Yet their concern for their community goes far beyond prayers and cooperation.

Lisa Bowman, a young mother in her early thirties told me, "During VBS we ask the children to bring in change. Last year we raised \$270 to help a needy family get their children ready for school." I asked if this kind of thing would make the needy family embarrassed by pointing to their financial situation. She quickly assured me that the recipients are anonymous. It is "touchy" in small community to give out gifts to needy for that very reason. She went on to tell me that the church has a "Good News Committee" that distributes a fund for people in the community in need. This fund is financed by the church setting aside 4% of its offerings each week.

One story to illustrate the use of this fund involved the one Jehovah's Witness family living in the community. Not long ago their house literally exploded and the first people to respond to them were the pastor and people from the Clinton Church of God. They physically helped them and gave them money to get them back on their feet. The family has never come to the church but has remarked in the community that the Clinton Church of God took better care of them than did their own church.

John Richter related an account of a recent fire in the Breakneck community, which burned a family out of their home. "Pastor Joe was one of the first people on the scene to help even though the family does not attend our church."

Interestingly, it is at the time of deepest need that the church touches their community most effectively. Pastor Joe is the chaplain for the local chapter of Hospice, which involves him in the large majority of deaths in the community. The number of funeral services he officiates at is far higher than other pastors of this sized church. Here,

the congregation rallies, providing funeral dinners to the bereaved families of the community. There is never a charge, although donations are accepted to this ministry. That this is considered a ministry can best be exemplified by the time a large Sunday program at the Clinton church was quickly followed by a Monday morning funeral. Pastor Wingrove says he will never forget that Sunday afternoon and evening as people came from everywhere “like ants” to meet the need. They did it . . . because they cared.

Scholars who study church attendance affirm that coming to a strange church for the first time is a formidable barrier to most people. Where do we go? Where are the bathrooms? Do they have a nursery? By scheduling many events of all kinds on the church property, these churches make their buildings “user friendly” to people throughout the community.

Easter egg hunts, fund-raising dinners, cook-offs, hayrides, community garage sales, and their dartball leagues have the community coming to the church on a regular basis. Thus there are none of the normal barriers to visitors to the church. They know where the bathrooms are because they had been at the church the previous Friday night for the Macaroni and Cheese Cook-off.

This community mindset of the congregations is reciprocated by the community in response. When the Breakneck people have their annual Peanut Butter Chocolate Easter Egg sale to raise funds for their ministry to children and when the Clinton folk sell their hero sandwiches, everyone buys in and even the local café helped with the marketing. By doing so, the community raised \$9,000.00 to make this ministry a reality.

### Focus

The Breakneck/Clinton circuit has avoided the pitfall of exclusivity that such stress on community could easily bring by maintaining their focus on outreach. Many rural/small town churches have succumbed to being nothing more than a neighborhood social club in their thirst for "community." With that being their main focus these churches have jettisoned about anything that might be offensive to any and everyone. It is not surprising that one of the main criticisms of small churches is that they have lost their focus and have become little more than community centers.

I suspect that this temptation is always at the door of these churches that are in such close physical proximity to their communities. Lisa Bowman made an insightful comment during our interview. A third generational attendee of the Breakneck church, she shared her concern that the church tends not to put enough emphasis on the spiritual growth needed. She had come to church all her life but never felt she needed to become a committed Christ follower until recently. This observation speaks eloquently to this issue in two facets: (1) there seems now to be a genuine concern currently regarding people's relationship with Jesus Christ; and, (2) this was obviously not always the case.

The latter fact was often underlined in my discussions with leadership of the churches. They seem to say all of the right terms but they often seem to be more clichés than meaningful reality. For instance, I asked the leadership at the Clinton church to tell me about the spiritual climate of the church. Did they see people continually growing in Christ and new people coming into a relationship with Him? Their response was, "Spirituality is the most important thing here." Probing for a deeper explanation proved fruitless.

In itself this would seem to be a slippery slope toward spiritual ineffectiveness. But God brought into the church a pastor who is deeply committed to Jesus Christ and to His word. The most obvious demonstration of this can be seen in the Sunday morning sermons—“meditations.” They are not long nor are they filled with incomprehensible theological jargon but based upon scriptural teaching and direct application.

As I noted earlier in this paper, on one of the Sundays I visited, Pastor Joe spoke on the parable of the talents as found in Matthew 25. The theme of the message is not what you normally expect from a sermon on that text. Pastor Joe does not focus on the “hotshot with the ten talents” nor on the “scaredy cat with the one talent” but on the middle servant with the two talents. Easily and competently he related that the message of Jesus was not about size but about serving well with what we have been given. As he spoke, I looked around at the congregation. They were enthralled with that truth and seemed to be encouraged with the teaching that just because they were not a mega-church did not mean that they were unimportant. It is no small wonder that people relate so closely with the sermons; they were prepared and given out of a heart that understood them and cared about them. These are two vital ingredients to any effective message.

As I spoke with various people about their own spiritual growth, several of them remarked that it was Pastor Joe’s sermons that affected them the most. Patty Pritts from the Clinton church said she appreciated the fact that they were based on the Bible but still spoke to their daily lives and relationships. Bernice Rowen agreed with Patty in her comment, “Pastor Joe speaks so I can understand him.” I believe Ellen Geary spoke for all in her response to the question of why she was growing spiritually, “Sermons apply to

my life every Sunday.” She said that Joe preaches sermons that are so applicable to her life that sometimes she believes he is a mind reader.

Actually, Ellen is not far wrong. You can see from his resume (Appendix C), Joe has a broad base of understanding people from training and experience from the realm of counseling. These skills have proven to be valuable as he guides his congregation to wholeness in spiritual and psychological health. There is also the value of his skills for the community. Several of the people mentioned how Pastor Joe has helped members of their extended family who were going through marital difficulties. He makes hospital visits an important part of his weekly schedule and many testify that it was in one of these visits that they or someone they loved came to be a disciple of Christ.

This understanding of human nature undergirded with the understanding of scripture has enhanced the leadership skills of the pastor. In reading over my notes and remembering those who were “eagerly anticipating reading the finished product,” I recognized that not everything I would write would be positive, encouraging, and affirming. In fact, I was sure that some of the material could possibly be quite painful. While this was not my intention, I would not be able to disguise the stories about churches as small as these. Anyone from the circuit would know immediately about what I was writing.

I wrote Pastor Wingrove for his advice. His response was most wise. He responded by encouraging me to “tell the story” and continued with this insightful response:

I'm a big advocate of process (my therapist days and all that), and Clinton is in process right now; I believe to force or short circuit it would be a mistake. They will come to “their” conclusions in “their” time. Sort of like a substance abusers who (as much as we might want them to) won't move from their addiction

until they bottom out/are ready, so too Clinton has to reach the point where they are ready to make their move. Till then we pray, support, keep them safe but don't enable. (2006)

With a broad program of events that exhausts one simply reading their calendar, it would be easy to allow the "fun" things to take precedence over the important. The high point of the congregation's year matches exactly the high point of Christendom's year as well. Easter is the apex with the combined Tenebrae service being one of the most well attended services they have.

The focus of prayer is important to the very core of the churches. There have been times in their history that desperate prayer was all that kept them going. Jack Sparks remembers when 18-20 people "hung together and prayed a lot" for this growth to happen. They pray regularly in worship, they pray when concerns are placed on the circuit-wide prayer list, and there is evidence that prayer guides and sustains them and their leadership on a regular basis in their weekly prayer times.

While most of the newcomers pointed to Pastor Joe as the one through whom their initial contact with Breakneck and Clinton churches came, further listening indicates that often it was a neighbor or family member who was the agent that caused this meeting to happen. It is amazing how energized a congregation can be in outreach when they are enthusiastic about their church and about their God.

An old missionary was quoted as saying, "Witnessing is just one beggar telling another where they found bread." I would add, the better the bread, the more enthusiastic the "telling."

Yet, it would seem from comments made that the pastor is the focal point of outreach and the congregation seems to be largely relegated only to the grandstands

cheering him on. The expansion of the Kingdom will always be limited in scope if this imbalance continues.

There is evidence, however, that Pastor Joe is patiently working in this area of ministry. Of all the people I interviewed, formally or informally, Lisa Bowman best evidences growth in discipleship. She is concerned about the spiritual condition of her community. She leads VBS and has recently headed up a new weekday kid's club ministry. She smiled as she shared that this ministry was actually born in the heart of Pastor Joe who talked with her about it until she caught the vision and took it over. "Pastor Joe leads people to come together. He's a leader not a ruler. He has enough self-confidence that he doesn't get mad if you shoot him down. He's not one who needs to have his own way." Evangelism is caught not taught.

Perhaps this concern was the motivation behind the decision of the church to purchase and distribute the "Jesus" video to every home in the community. Involvement in outreach, even as little as giving away a video to one's neighbor whets their appetite for further involvement in getting out the "good news."

### **Decision Making and Money Management**

Nowhere in the rural/small town church is the family relationship style more apparent than in the making of decisions. As I read the minutes of the churches I was studying, I remembered when I went into my first church board meeting in the rural church in central Illinois. I had been well trained in *Robert's Rules of Order* from elementary school forward. As I called the meeting to order and laid out the agenda a quiet smile spread across the faces of those in attendance. It said loud and clear, "Well, here's another new pastor we need to break in!"

How correct they were. I did not read of one decision with a split vote in the minutes of the Breakneck and Clinton churches. Rather, every decision was by consensus. I also learned from my own experience that to bring a new idea to a board meeting would have little hope of being enacted during that meeting no matter how logical and excellent an idea it was. First, the idea needed to permeate the congregation, gain the support of the leaders—on the board or not—and if it set well with the congregation, it would easily pass the next meeting. The person who suggested that the real business in the rural/small town church is done in the parking lot before or after the meetings was exactly right. The board meeting was important to put the "official" seal upon items pre-agreed on and to deliberate matters in the first round of solving a problem or meeting a need. That is the way the family operates.

I asked Pastor Wingrove about this insight and he nodded enthusiastically, "absolutely!" He shared that the young people were raising money for a mission trip and asked if they could have a "bingo-but-not-bingo" night at the church to do so. The large majority of the people in the church saw no problem with that idea. Two families, however, were uncomfortable with the concept. "So we decided not to do it at this time rather than pushing the matter through and causing tensions in the body. We could have run roughshod over the opposition but no one would have been happy about it in the congregation." This is a true example of family-style of decision making.

With this in mind, the Administrative Council meetings become more day-to-day problem solving events than governing ones. Tuning into one of these sessions you will find matters dealt with like the replacement of electrical switches, installation of new

lights, getting rid of the hornet nest in the roof, fixing the water leak in the men's restroom, and the decision to keep the temperature in the church at sixty degrees.

One of the most significant discoveries came as I looked at the meetings that were held during the very painful breakup of the three-church circuit. I wondered what decisions had to be made. With what considerations did they wrestle? How did they part with their pastor? All these things were what I would have thought would have been included in the minutes of those meetings. Alas, there was absolutely no mention of the breakup to be found. While normal process would demand that decisions would have to be made, the silence of the minutes strongly suggests these decisions were made in the parking lot meetings, at the local watering hole, or over the phone lines by those "in charge." When everyone was satisfied they were making the correct decision and they continued on, no one thought of including anything in the minutes because in reality, there probably were *no official meetings*.

Closely connected with the family philosophy of making decisions in the rural/small town church is their family budgeting process. Families are not foolish when it comes to spending, normally, but they do not have the tight restrictions businesses have on budgets. Need generally prevails over preset spending limits. So it is with the Breakneck/Clinton circuit.

Their budget is a hybrid, worked out by percentage of offerings as well as specific amounts. The financial plan at the Breakneck church is to set aside the Sunday school offering for paying the bills and maintaining the church property. The worship service offering goes to pay the pastor, less \$50 per month for youth and \$50 per month for fellowship expenses. Four percent of their income is designated to a "Good Neighbor

Fund” which is the emergency fund for the community I noted elsewhere. Fifteen percent of the income is designated for the conference and other gifts. The other designations mentioned are made only after the pastor is fully paid.

Money is a factor that has great divisive potential in any church but especially the smaller one. A loose budget process generally works well if there is a large back-up amount “just in case.” Usually the rural/small town church finds its existence imperiled when there is a pastor change or, more commonly, when they are faced with a large expense such as needing a new roof or furnace, for example.

I asked the leadership at the Breakneck church if there was any “hidden” money. Were there accounts that are not included in the annual financial reports that only the insiders know about, lest there be a move to spend it and put the church in dangerous financial grounds? “No,” was their response. They did acknowledge that they had enough savings in their savings account to keep the church functioning for six months should a tragedy occur but that amount is included in every financial report and everyone was aware of it.

The Clinton church leadership has a little different tact on this in that rather than keeping the “extra money” in a savings account, they fund those projects that have been awaiting funding. Not long ago, one of the members died leaving a sizable gift to the church. The church had been waiting to make their building handicap accessible and to install bathrooms on the level of the sanctuary rather than in the basement. At last this was their chance to have this done and they easily made the decision.

There is a natural avoidance of borrowing as you could expect in an economically depressed area. When the Clinton church was building their fellowship hall across the

road, they decided to build only as the funds came in. Finally, they were at the point where they were only lacking the doors. They ordered the doors by faith, believing that the money would come in when the bills were due. They smiled as they related the story, “When the bills were due, the money was there!”

“But,” I asked, “What does happen when a tragedy strikes and you have just spent the inheritance on the addition?” They smiled and said that they would take special offerings or have fund raisers. Testifying to the effectiveness of this process for them, in 2005 the Breakneck church installed two new furnaces and two new air conditioners and still finished the year in the black.

Dealing with finances reminds one of the early church as described in Acts 4:32. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” The minutes said the church was badly in need of painting at one time but they had little money with which to buy paint. The natural suggestion would almost be expected, “Ask each of the members to purchase one gallon of paint to supply that need!”

Both of the churches are generous giving churches. While recognizing the tendency of people to overstate their giving records for surveys, the Clinton church revealed that 57% of them tithed or were close to giving a tithe. Of that group one-third attested to giving more than a tithe. The Breakneck congregation also reported 57% tithed with fully one half of that group giving more than a tithe. The down-side of this was that many of the people were on limited and/or fixed incomes that keep the amount of income limited as well.

It is interesting to see the relationship between the growth in attendance and the growth in giving. Normally, it takes awhile for new people to get “up to speed” in giving when they begin attending a new church. Seldom does the financial curve mirror the attendance curve in a growing church. In studying the Clinton church’s financial records I was delighted with what I discovered. In 1995 the average giving worshiper gave \$655 while in 2004 the average moved up to \$705. Factor in the inflation factor and the per capita giving has remained just about the same.

One of my individual interviews was with Jack Sparks, the chairman and lay leader of the Breakneck Church. After enjoying the man’s vision for the church and listening to his vast knowledge of the church’s history for about a half hour, the interview somewhat abruptly halted. In my notes I wrote, “We ended our interview because Jack had to go home and get his tools to repair the toilet in the men’s bathroom!”

### **Pastoral Leadership**

It was at the Clinton congregational meeting that we attempted to lay out an historic timeline. Enough to say, it was not a successful endeavor. One of the struggles they had was remembering the names of their former pastors. One comment was made that pastors seldom stayed very long in their churches. A woman who had grown up in the church said, “I can honestly say I do not remember the name of one preacher during my early years at the church.” Someone else inserted, “But our children will never forget Joe Wingrove!” The statement was roundly applauded by those in attendance.

With the rural/small town church tending to be a testing ground for new pastors and a retirement haven for older ones, there seems to be a downplaying of the importance of this office. Add to that the hardiness of these churches and the strong lay leadership,

and it is easy to come away with the impression that anyone can pastor a rural/small town church. In a sense, that is true except when you add the modifier “well” to the verb “pastor.” Not everyone can pastor one of these churches *well* (1 Tim. 5:17).

Given the importance of the “family” kind of relationships that make up a rural/small town church, it is essential for the pastor to become a part of the family. At the same time, because the pastor is by nature an “outsider” the temptation is strong to hibernate in the office and appear only on Sunday mornings. Their attitude is, “If the people do not consider me part of the family, let them.” It is amazing how common this attitude is in the minds of pastors of these kinds of churches. Not only do they not help with the church events but at times they do not even attend them. It is not difficult to discover why they have little influence in the lives of their members and of their community.

Joe Wingrove lived in the community before becoming the pastor of the circuit. His father had lived there before him which not only gave him credibility with the community but also enabled him to understand them. Before becoming their pastor, Joe had had a counseling practice in the area and was affiliated with the chaplaincy program in the local hospitals. His background in counseling (Appendix C) provided an understanding of the human psyche that enabled him to understand and work with people at a level beneath the surface. Not unrelated was his work as chaplain of the local hospice program giving him introduction to the people of the community during their most difficult days. One becomes a member of the family rather quickly during times like these.

In his report for 2004 he gave the following statistics: 266 visits to homes, 462 visits to hospitals, conducted 68 funerals, wrote and sent out 219 letters and 483 e-mails. He also served 69 people communion who were unable to attend the church communion service. Certainly this is the mark of a busy pastor, but more, it is the mark of one who pastors not just a church but an entire community. Obviously, many of these are “touch” visits that provides open doors to deeper relationships if those he visits so desire.

As I interviewed the various individuals, Joe’s people skills came up repeatedly. Bernice Rowan said, “Pastor Joe is so good. I believe that the way he relates to people is the reason the church is growing. Especially the newer people are coming because of him.” Ellen Geary agreed, “Pastor Joe makes them (visitors) feel welcome. I believe that the church is growing because people are treated well. When Joe came it just started to grow. He goes out of his way to make us feel good.” I asked Candy Laws what stood out to her about the Clinton church. Her immediate response was “Pastor Joe. He’s a people person! He cares and makes you feel welcome.” She then added, “What we like about Pastor Joe is that he will go visit people even though none of the family go to the church.”

Lawrence Richter said, “We don’t see much outreach in church itself but the pastor visits the hospital. Then the people he visits come to the church and are ready to accept Him.”

Jack Sparks’ comment was, “Joe really loves God and has a great concern for people’s relationship with Him.”

During the Breakneck congregational gathering, accolades regarding Pastor Joe’s people skills came like with the rapidity of a machine gun. “Joe is a people person.” “He-

listens to you and takes time with you.” “If you need him and he cannot come, he calls you on the telephone.” “I was in the hospital and he visited me every day.” “He goes even to Pittsburgh to visit people who are in the hospital there.” “My husband did not come to church, but Joe spent time with him anyway.” “We recently had a fire in our community. The next day Joe was there even though the people do not come to the church.” “Joe is a young people’s pastor, yet he loves older people too.” “He has time for the kids.” When the people paused to take a breath from this outpouring of praise, one of the men laughingly said, “I wonder how he can be everywhere at the same time! Wherever he is needed, he is there.”

John Richter who has lived across from the Breakneck church all of his life probably summed up Joe’s people-skilled relationships best in his interview. As I have mentioned, John had been diagnosed with prostate cancer when Joe came to visit. “He converted me. I was baptized and joined the church. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I can’t speak enough of him.” When I asked him why he believed the church was growing he replied, “The pastor. I probably sound like a broken record.”

Along with these people skills and probably as a result of them, Pastor Joe has a sense of inclusion that draws people not only to him but to the church and to each other. Soon after becoming the pastor of the circuit he introduced *The Circuit Rider*, a midweek paper filled with news, announcements, preparations for the coming meditations and events, and even puzzles for the children.

With one pastor serving two churches one could almost predict that there would be charges of favoritism of one church toward the other or that there might be a tendency in this regard on the part of the pastor over his treatment by the two churches.

There would be cause for favoritism in this circuit. After visiting the Breakneck Church that virtually gave Pastor Joe a standing ovation for his ministry to them, I visited the Clinton church and noticed very few of his praises sung by those gathered there. I was so surprised by the difference that I stopped to talk with Joe after that first meeting. I knew Amy, his wife, had grown up in that church and I wondered if this was but an example of the prophet who is without honor in his own country. Joe smiled and said it probably was and that he and Amy had struggled to come to the circuit for that very reason. Later, as I interviewed many of the newer members of Clinton I was impressed how closely their appreciation for Joe mirrored that of the Breakneck church.

This leadership “honor” mindset seemed to carry over into following Joe’s leadership as well. Historically, the Sunday schools of these churches were absolutely huge ... 150 or more per Sunday! This came as a result of the churches moving their preaching services weekly from Sunday morning to Sunday evening to omitting them all together every third Sunday. Sunday school was the only consistent event at the church. One of the former pastors of this circuit shared with me that in many of these churches there would be more people leaving after Sunday school than coming to the worship service.

With this background it became all the more difficult to understand that while the worship services are growing in the two churches, the Sunday school at Clinton is far from keeping pace with the other growth and is a mere shadow of what it used to be. Hints at updating the Sunday school program from Joe were met with resistance and sometimes even bordering on hostility. Rather than throw down the gauntlet, Pastor Joe

simply sidestepped the issue and developed other programs that will meet the needs that Sunday school normally met.

With all of these circumstances making favoritism a ripe issue, no one in the public meetings or individual interviews gave the slightest hint that Joe was in any way bias for or against either church. Even in the bulletins, which are almost identical, they are individualized on the cover with the words, “The Church of God at Breakneck,” and on the other, “The Church of God at Clinton.” They felt he loved them all equally and when he would mention something about their “sister church” nothing was ever said that was in the least bit derogatory.

This inclusiveness can be seen as well within the churches themselves. The most recent Sunday I visited the Breakneck church was the service in which they shared communion. I found the serving of the elements in this church significant. There seemed to be an eagerness for this at the church for communion rather than the “Oh no, we’re going to be running late again this Sunday” attitude I have often found in other churches. I was invited to assist in the serving of the elements. Pastor Joe began with a short meditation, an explanation, and prayer. This was followed by our moving to the back of the sanctuary to serve the two oldest ladies in the back of the church—a kind, thoughtful gesture, which was not lost on the congregation. This was the first time they had done this. Then, Pastor Joe and I returned to the front and he invited those who desired to partake to come forward. Instantly and quickly they came. I served the bread, which was a loaf with each person taking a piece. They then moved to Joe who responded with their name saying something like, “Bob, Jesus loved you this much,” as in “His body broken and his blood shed for you”—going from the universal to the personal. They then dip the

bread into the cup, partake and then move back to their seats. Having met a few of the people over the weekend, I also greeted people using their names. All of them responded with a smile. We do like the sound of our own names.

A temptation that often goes hand in hand with a people-person is the tendency to be free with information. The person who knows much is easily swayed to prove it by sharing much. As I asked the leadership at Breakneck about Joe's pastoring skills, I was surprised that the skill that came to their minds was not compassion or brilliance but *confidentiality*. When I asked a similar question in the Clinton church their response was exactly the same. In a small community like theirs you get the impression that everyone knows everyone's business. It would seem to be like living in the proverbial fishbowl. But it is for this very reason they treasure confidentiality so much. The pastor who lets confidential information slip inadvertently will be exposed in an instant and probably never be able to regain credibility in that situation again. Joe's training in the field of mental health has no doubt alerted him to this danger and several remarked about this asset.

Speaking of trust, normally it takes around five years for a pastor to gain enough trust from his or her congregation to be able to lead it past the maintenance stage and into growth. When I asked the leadership in the two churches during my interviews with them how long it took for them to be able to trust Joe, they looked at me like I had just asked the most ridiculous question. "We trusted him right from the start," was the separate response from each of them. The statistics indicate that growth began just about the time Joe arrived in the pulpit suggesting the validity of their perception.

Certainly his earlier connections with the churches helped as did his personality, but having just come through a situation perceived by them to have their pastor abandon them would seem be the perfect scenario for suspicion and distrust. What made the difference? Joe came to them when they felt no one cared whether they lived or died. Many students of church growth suggest that coming to a church on the upswing is the most desirable in that the momentum is already moving forward. In my experience, the church that is the most quickly responsive to a new pastor is a church that has gone through great stress and senses the new pastor really cares about them. Certainly, this describes Joe Wingrove and the Clinton/Breakneck circuit.

### **Transitioning**

It was at the Breakneck church that I asked the question no one wanted me to ask: "What happens when Joe leaves?" In response to my probing, their silence made it obvious that the board had given little thought about what was to happen when Joe leaves either through death, retirement, or resignation. Yet, this is an issue that the shepherd and the church must address in the small church if it is to outlive the current pastor in healthy existence.

I continued, "You know he's not going to be here forever." "He promised us he would!" they laughingly responded. Being older, I suspect they are hoping he would be there for at least their lifetime.

In the rural/small town church getting the same people in leadership year after year is not uncommon; it is expected. In the congregational surveys it was obvious that the roles of leadership were not equally spread out across the entire body. In the Clinton congregation only slightly over a quarter of them had been active in a church office in the

last decade with the Breakneck congregation being only slightly more involved at 36% of the congregation active in a church office.

I asked about the governmental structure of the church and discovered that the church governs with only one board. They tend to keep the same people on the board as “the only ones who will take the jobs.” One of the leaders only half teasingly shared with me that, “In a small church like this once you’ve got a job, you’ve got it for life!” We laughed but it was a bit painful levity. Candy Laws started attending the church 6-7 years ago and was asked to help out in VBS. She did and three years later she was put in charge, a role she continues in to the present. She is probably doing an excellent job, but if she were not I would suggest there would be a great reluctance to replacing her with someone else. Families do not operate that way.

We talked about the vote process. They told me that they put the same names up each time and no others seem to be willing to let their names be nominated. Usually, the same names are re-nominated and the votes are all decided by acclamation. They felt that by this process everyone had a chance. I continued my probing by asking if there might be a fear of hurting feelings that has kept younger people from allowing their names to be entered into the voting process and thus moving into leadership roles. They soberly nodded agreement to the validity of that possibility. Looking back at the way these churches do business it is obvious that this is not only a possibility but actually a reality. In the healthy family, the transition comes as the parents voluntarily step aside to make way for their children rather than being forced out through a rebellion.

I sensed a little more adamancy in the Clinton church against bringing in younger leaders. I asked them, “Are you afraid to lose your jobs in the church?” No, they did not

believe this to be true. “No one steps forward to help. No one wants our jobs. No one comes to congregational meetings.” In this they were correct. The meeting where this interaction took place was for the whole congregation and only five people attended . . . all leaders. They believe that the reason for this was the belief in the church that those in charge will take care of everything and others just do not need to be there. This was confirmed by Bernice Rowan, whom I asked why the newer people were not moving into positions of leadership. Her response was, “The current leaders are doing a good job so why worry about it.” She went on to explain that she believed that this was the reason that no one attended congregational meetings.

I suspect there is more to this disparity than simply having a desire to hang on to their positions. The generation gap evident throughout our country seems alive and well especially at the Clinton church. Witness this response to my request for them to identify their weakness. “Children’s ministry is not a priority to younger families,” they affirmed. “Younger people do not have the same sense of ownership. Their attendance seems to be more hit or miss than the older people. Younger families do not ‘make’ (their word) their children stay for Sunday school.” With the power currently firmly in the hands of the older generation with the younger counterparts making no effort to change things, leadership transition in that church will no doubt continue to move at a much slower rate than that at the Breakneck church.

The attitude toward mentoring younger people to become leaders seems to be more accepted at Breakneck with one younger leader on the administrative counsel who is under 40 years of age. Lisa Bowman, a 31-year-old mother has been greatly influenced by Pastor Joe to the point she is working with VBS and has recently begun Pioneer

Ministries children's weekday programs. Lisa pointed out that the Breakneck church as a whole seems to realize that the younger generation is not "into" church like the older people were. They are starting a group called "Willing Workers" in an attempt to generate such an attitude. Lisa expressly shared her concern that the younger people are not as involved in leadership as they must be if they are to step into future responsibilities in the church. She shared that her greatest fear is that the church is growing old without plans for its future. I share that concern.

### **Spirituality**

It was in 1960 at the Breakneck church that the Mourner's Bench was finally removed. It had always sat in the front of the church and during the three week revival meetings was usually filled with people committing their lives to Jesus Christ. Only God Himself knows how many came to a relationship with Christ kneeling there. But the removal of that piece of furniture was certainly not the end of spirituality. The church's walk with God or being connected to the Vine is absolutely essential if it is to bear the fruit the scriptures call for in John 15. As I wrote earlier in this paper, there are many stories of people in the church who have been introduced to a relationship with Jesus Christ through the ministry of the church and its pastor. Stories of crisis and turmoil abound as well where people give testimony of the deepening of their walk with the Savior. One newer believer was challenged by an unbelieving spouse that he was "into God too much," and refused to reconcile on that basis. Many of the individuals I interviewed gave evidence of spiritual growth in such a way that it was natural, expected, and not forced.

From my observation, I believe that the sermons and the worship services spawn much of this attitude. Pastor Wingrove preaches practical messages that are firmly founded in the Scriptures. Everything from the structure of the service to the little inserted comments in the order of service in the bulletin points to a deepening of one's relationship with Jesus Christ and advancing toward mature growth. Of course, the personalized sharing of the Lord's Table and the obvious eagerness to do so by the parishioners gives impetus of body life and spiritual health.

Prayer is a major factor in the life of the churches. The prayer request list is full and there is strong evidence that this is not just a routine part of the service. The churches have a prayer line where current and urgent needs are communicated to the congregations for prayer.

One factor that belies the condition of the heart is the direction of concern in response to difficult and stressful situations. In response to the 9/11 tragedy of 2001, the church threw open its doors for a community prayer service and the whole community responded. When the break-up of the circuit occurred, the thinking that kept the churches going was the fact that they loved their community and they loved the other church—truly a Christ-like response.

Scriptures teach that the fruit of the Spirit is love. Certainly, these churches exemplify the reality of that truth. I saw sacrifice of time and of money while I was there. Many of the activities were done quietly behind the scenes for no credit but made a large impact. Their hearts expanded to their community but also beyond their community to ministries like the Katrina Hurricane disaster, to a needy church in Haiti, and to meeting

the needs of prisoners families during Christmas time through preparing and collecting gift boxes for distribution.

The CGGC vision is to grow healthy churches that make more and better disciples. In the Clinton and Breakneck churches I saw churches growing, not because of artificial, momentary marketing ploys, but by deepening their roots and producing fruit for the Kingdom of God—fruit that remains.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

The rural and small town churches have become almost an anachronism of the good old Norman Rockwell days. Everyone has warm feelings about them and people do enjoy the stories of the “go-to-meetin’ days” of yesteryear where the flock would gather for the singing of the “Sweet Bye and Bye” and other “golden oldies.” The fact is that far from passing quietly into extinction, there are rural and small town churches that are very much alive today.

Statistics indicate, however, that tied closely with the decline of the rural population, the rural/small town church, too, is facing declining attendance. Many of these churches are, in fact, closing their doors and becoming only a footnote of history. This is not a universal condition by any means. While some rural and small town churches are striving to keep their doors open and their bills paid, others are genuinely healthy and thriving. The latter churches are growing in attendance with enough finances coming in not only to pay the pastor and keep the doors open but also to assist the needy in the community as well as minister the message of the Gospel in ever-widening circles all over the globe.

The purpose of this study was to discover what has been effective in turning the rural/small town churches from existence to life, from a mere vegetative state to an effective, healthy, thriving ministry.

To comprehend this purpose fully I began by reaching into the Scriptures to clearly define the purpose for the church itself. This unavoidably brought me to a direct encounter with the *Missio Dei*, or the “mission of God.” This mission began at creation and has moved steadily forward to our day and promises to continue until the consummation. Here it is that we discover the reason for the church be it a rural church, a small town church, or a suburban mega-church. God uniquely created His people as the vehicle through which He reveals Himself to not only the world but indeed to the entire universe.

In the second chapter I have shown from Scripture what it is that enables the church to reveal God—bearing fruit. It is in producing that for which its nature calls—apple trees produce apples and God trees bear God-like fruit! Healthy churches are not always large churches but they must always be fruit-bearing churches.

In studying the church, or even more broadly, the chosen people of God, leadership seems always to play a vital role in making them effective and fruitful. While there are many models of leadership referred to in Scripture, the model that universally stands out is that of the shepherd. We see in David the smooth transition from leading sheep in the field to leading the people of God in the kingdom. Jesus referred to Himself as the “good shepherd” and called his disciples to be shepherds as well. This model carries seamlessly to the leader of the church, or “pastor” as she is referred to in the Churches of God, General Conference (CGGC). The characteristics noted in the

description of the great shepherd of Psalm 23 are characteristics that denote the effective pastor.

With this background of what God intended for the church and its pastor to be, I moved into a more specific study of the uniqueness of the rural/small town church.

Much of the information written about these churches seems to come under the broad category of sociology. This includes the way people in these communities tend to relate to each other, how they process information, their decision-making patterns, and how they perceive change. Their relational matrix resembles more of a family than a business and while the bulk of writings regarding “doing” church in 2006 take the business model as their paradigm, this model simply will not work in the small town/rural church situation.

Pastors without this understanding find pastoring such a church extremely frustrating and are largely ineffective while generating conflict on every side as they initiate one “can’t miss” program after another to a flock whose heels are dug in more deeply with every passing board meeting.

Frustrated pastors tend to “hear God’s call to move” far more than satisfied pastors and the rural/small town churches have had more than their fair share of pastoral changes. Each of these changes deepens the feeling that they are not worth very much. Self-esteem of these communities is not tremendously high anyway as one by one their friends and family members move away to greener pastures of economic, educational, and social opportunities. So to add to this feeling the revolving door of ministers causes them naturally to come to the place that they do not expect much and usually get exactly what they expect.

Often this attitude pushes them into a survival mode where their goal is literally to keep the doors open for as long as they live. This, of course, breeds all kinds of irregularities within the flock as the church was never created simply to survive but was created with the mission to reach out to others with the message of reconciliation.

The Breakneck/Clinton Churches of God circuit exhibited few of these irregularities. Attendance was not declining despite the population decline all about them. These churches passed through a crisis a decade ago of seeing their pastor leave along with one-third of their circuit, yet without the despair and loss of self-esteem one would tend to expect. Rather than the anticipated continual slide in the number of people attending, these two churches have grown by over 70% in average worship attendance during the last ten years.

Led by a godly, loving pastor by the name of Joe Wingrove, these churches reached out to their community in a visible, demonstrated love of Christ. There were no gimmicks or marketing ploys that often do cause spurts of growth, which excite people for a time but do not carry over into any lasting change. Their growth was steady with conversion growth from people in the community who were able to see Christ among the members as they exhibited the love of Christ in their relationships.

### **Findings**

When I first visited the Clinton Church of God, I was introduced and invited to explain the project to the congregation. One of the women, probably wondering why I would spend so much time on such an obvious fact, immediately spoke up from the congregation and said, "The reason for our turnaround is the pastor!" and Pastor Joe immediately responded, "It's because of the wonderful group of people." There is an

obvious love affair going on in these churches between the pastor and the congregations. These congregations, unlike the majority of churches in similar circumstances, are thriving. My questions produced the findings that discovered the factors that turned these churches from stagnating, declining congregations ten years ago to healthy, growing ones today.

- 1. When did the change from declining attendance to growth take place and what circumstances were involved in the transition? Developing an annotated time-line would prove helpful for each of the churches.*

While my study involved the Breakneck and Clinton churches, the Buchanan church certainly figures into the process. The attendance curve of the three churches seemed to have flat-lined or leveled out for many years. Between 1995 and 2004 the Buchanan church worship average jumped from 58 to 96. Breakneck's move took a bit longer with their worship attendance average moving from 34 in 1996 to 73 in 2004 while the Clinton congregation moved from an average of 42 to 68 in that same period of time.

This leap forward interestingly coincided with the Buchanan church's decision to withdraw from the circuit and hire the pastor full-time. The growth at Buchanan would have been expected with its decision to become a full-time charge rather than part of a three-church circuit. It was a step of faith on their part believing they could become a more effective church as a full-time charge. Certainly, it was not viewed by the other two churches as that, but I believe that was their intention.

The move forward in the other two churches is a little more difficult to understand. In my conversations with the leadership of these churches, this breakup

forced them to do a lot more serious thinking of the basics of why they existed at all. At Breakneck especially, there was a feeling that the community needed to have a church and if they closed there would be no church there. There was also a sense that the two churches needed each other. They knew that neither church had enough resources to make it financially without the other. I believe that this re-visioning of their reason to exist did much to take the emphasis off themselves resulting in a new focus on the work of the Kingdom. Certainly, this pleased the Lord and He has blessed them accordingly. Here is a case of what could be viewed as a negative being turned in a very positive event.

The other factor that contributed to the turn around was the coming of Pastor Joe Wingrove to become the pastor of the Breakneck/Clinton circuit. Joe came to the pulpit as a man whose background had trained him in the art of working with the hurting. Make no mistake, these two churches *were* hurting. There was a feeling of abandonment not only by their sister congregation, but by the West Pennsylvania Conference as well. The Conference Administrator at that time was the father of their former pastor, Tim Beatty, and there was a feeling that the conference in its entirety was abandoning them and in effect was leaving them for dead. I personally do not believe this to be the case, knowing the parties involved, yet it was their perception, which was reality to them.

Pastor Wingrove came in loving them. Like a good shepherd, he quickly learned their names and they learned his "voice." When they were hurting, he was there. When they called him, he responded. There is no greater cure for an inferiority complex, be it in an individual or church, than to be considered worthy by another. Joe Wingrove brought that assurance to these churches:

stories of the special impact Pastor Joe had on them and on their families in time of crisis or need.

The outreach of these rural/small town churches into their community is significant. Over and over people told me about the funeral dinners the churches provide for families of their community. Death is a time of loss and a time of need. To have a church respond in a loving, Christ-like way with no strings attached makes a huge impact on the people in the entire area. Because of Pastor Joe's connection with the local hospice through a chaplaincy position, he is naturally there when families need him. He has a significantly large number of funerals and by connecting the families with the church in this way he deepens the impact that the church has on them.

It is vital to see that this heart of compassion is an important part of their make-up. The rural/small town population is used to relying upon each other. It may be that a farmer's corn is not in for whatever reason and a storm is heading towards the area. It is not unique to see two or three harvesting machines working together in the field of that farmer to beat the storm. Borrowing the proverbial cup of flour from the neighbor next door is done by few people in suburbia but is an expected part of life in the small towns. It is natural then to see them reserve a percentage of the offerings to assist families in need in their community. Last year's Vacation Bible School's offerings going to help an unidentified family in their community to get school clothes for their children to wear to school is not in the least heroic or out of the ordinary.

Concern for others by the churches overflows beyond the community. During my first visit to the Breakneck church I noticed a pile of shoeboxes on the platform. They were collecting these boxes and filling them with small gifts to give to kids who would

otherwise have no Christmas presents at all. They collected nearly 600 of these boxes from the churches and from the community as well. Offerings for crisis situations such as the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina produced a far greater proportionate offering from these rural/small town churches than came from other churches many of which were much larger congregations.

The loving attitude that produces such generosity at Breakneck/Clinton is the antithesis to that of the rural/small town church, which is in a fear mode, desperately clinging to every red cent to keep the church open. To discuss outreach with the latter is seen as too expensive and is voted down overtly or tacitly on a regular basis. Obviously, the attractiveness of the generosity of the former is seen by outsiders as positive while the latter attitude is viewed as tightfisted, miserly unfriendliness. The latter may *strive* but it is the former that *thrives*.

3. *What attitudes on the part of the congregation needed to be confronted or encouraged? How was this done? Possible attitudes to be considered would include fear, selfishness, exclusiveness, and the drive to control.*

Certainly, there was the attitude of fear when the breakup of the circuit occurred but that was countered by a “can-do” attitude that these churches seem to possess in abundance. I asked those at the Clinton church about any “hidden” money which rural/small town churches often put in a little known bank account “just in case.” They replied that they had no hidden money but they had recently received an inheritance and were using that money to build the new addition to their building. That addition would take all of that money, leaving them with no financial cushion. I asked about any planning for a possible catastrophe or large expense like replacing a roof or a furnace.

They just smiled and told me confidently that the people would rally and the money would be there when the need was due.

This process was best exemplified by their building of their fellowship hall across the road. As I wrote earlier in this paper, they built sequentially as the money came in, never going into debt. Finally, their planned opening was on the horizon, the money was gone, yet the doors were not purchased yet. What did they do? "We ordered the door because we knew that when they arrived, the money would be there!" They did . . . and it was.

Power and control are normal issues in the rural/small town churches. In the majority of the rural/small town churches during difficult days, some individuals necessarily come to the forefront to lead. Eventually these people become enamored with this position and often strangle the church with their iron-fisted grip. In both the Breakneck and Clinton churches there was a group of leaders who had been in office a long time.

The way the two churches handled these issues was quite different. The Breakneck church leaders seemed to have a far looser hold on their positions than did the Clinton church leaders even though their tenure was similar. As we discussed the reasons for the long service of the Administrative Council members at Breakneck there seemed to be a sense that perhaps they were not being continually re-elected because they were doing such a good job but possibly because no one wanted to hurt their feelings by running against them. They tended to agree with that but pointed out that they were already trying to include younger people on their board having elected a younger man on the council during the most recent election. I encouraged their mentoring people to take

their places on that board and they enthusiastically began to immediately name names of possible candidates.

At the Clinton church there was little discussion desired in this area. When I brought it up I sensed a coolness in their reaction. Certainly, they were not adamant but were fairly certain that the reason there was so little response of the congregation as a whole was because things were going so well under their leadership so there was no need to change. After all, why should people come to a congregational meeting when things were all under control?

On my study visit to the two churches, I set up identical schedules. On Friday evening I called for the entire congregation to come for conversational information about their church. On Saturday morning I asked to meet with the Administrative Council. At Breakneck on Friday evening, the building was nearly full and the discussion lively. The next morning there were only a couple on the Administrative Council who were there that had not been there the night before. At Clinton, their Friday evening meeting was attended by less than ten people; that was the number they had expected. "No one attends our congregational meetings," was the explanation. The next morning at the Administrative Council meeting, there were the same people who were in attendance with the exception of two new faces and one who had been there the evening before but was unable to attend that morning. The majority of the individual interviewees which were set up at Clinton immediately following the Administrative Council meeting had not been in attendance at either preceding event.

It would be a mistake to surmise that the Clinton leadership is simply holding on to the control of the church. They are active and are no doubt the ones responsible for the

erection of the building across the road from their sanctuary. They have put in a new sound system, together with facilities with which to record the services, which they regularly take to the shut-ins of their church and community. Problems come when an outsider initiates a program or ministry not on the current leadership's agenda. They have a heavy investment in the way things are and change would suggest that their ways are not the best. This is a painful admission for any of us and one that grows ever more painful with age.

The best illustration of this would certainly be the Sunday school situation at the Clinton church. It meets, as it has always met, right after the morning worship service is completed. The adult class meets in the sanctuary. The teaching consists mainly of reading aloud the Sunday school lesson book. Before the service, the church was alive and warm and friendly. People talked, laughed, and hugged. During the service as we *passed the peace* the same atmosphere prevailed. I was glad to be there. When the service was over I began talking with a younger couple with children, seeking to pick up information I would not be able to get in a formal situation. After a very few minutes they kind of hurried me out of the building following the large majority of the congregation into the parking lot. It was Sunday school time and conversation was inappropriate on the inside I discovered. Aside from the many who did not stay for the teaching of Sunday school, my concern was increased by seeing the number of children getting into the cars and trucks and leaving the area. As I studied the numbers, I saw that while the worship attendance had moved from an average of 41 in 1994 to 68 in 2004, the Sunday school average attendance had dropped from 44 to 23 during that same period of time. It was

painfully obvious that the growth of the church had significantly left the Sunday school behind!

In talking to Pastor Wingrove about the problem, he admitted concern. His answer speaks volumes of why the circuit he pastors is thriving while others are simply striving.

I worry a lot about holding/growing worship until transition without a viable CE component—have attempted to nurture changes in CE but have been met with resistance, even anger. The attitude is “this is the way we always do it, it's here for them—all they need to do is come.” In the meantime they watch 90% of the people leave the sanctuary after worship and wonder why.

The heavy activity load we have (weekly youth, weekly Pioneer Club, dart ball, bowling league, men's groups. etc) is my sort of indirect way of making sure that small group connection and discipleship take place until such time as transition occurs at the church.

(It is) Sort of like the story by Lao-Tze from the Tao-Teh-King—“Who is there who can make muddy water clear? But if you leave it alone it will become clear of itself.” A little less passive than that perhaps, certainly indirect; but (I am) praying for wisdom to see the opportunities for small change when they arise and to understand the fear that drives clinging to familiar means rather than looking to ends. You'll notice I believe in processing change here. This is the only way to make change happen that will last.

In the meantime, as we grow the new among the old, I try hard to remember what unique, flawed people we all are and I remember what a man named Fred Buechner whose lecture I once sat in said, in fact try to make it my touchstone as we work together at Clinton, “Forgive us every face we cannot look upon with joy . . . ” I do appreciate them all and I gotta believe that we were put together for a reason.

It would seem that patience is vital for the pastor of a thriving rural/small town church. As newer people come into the church, the transition eventually takes place. The obvious question is, *can things wait until the transition takes place?*

To that problem Pastor Wingrove would deal in a more indirect way and find another way of accomplishing the goal. After all, it is the goal we are concerned about, not the process of reaching it. Glancing at a recent copy of *The Circuit Rider*, their

monthly newsletter one finds himself panting after just reading their schedule. On Monday is dart ball; Tuesday is Pioneer Club night as well as choir practice and Clinton Administrative Council; Wednesday is the scheduled Bible Study with the Breakneck Administrative Council afterwards one evening; Thursday at 6:00 is the youth meeting and 7:30 the MUGS men's meeting; with Friday evening the all-church bowling league. That brings the church to the weekends where there are dinners, special events, and on and on. These are not simply activities to keep the congregation busy and off the Clinton and Breakneck streets but are designed for a purpose. Dart ball, for instance, is one of the best mentoring times they have. This brings the young men and their seniors together for fellowship and builds rapport that often leads to future interaction about things far more important than throwing those little darts. Certainly, this occasionally happens in Sunday school but dart ball would seem to be a more excellent setting.

Handling potential conflict well in a situation such as this in a rural/small town church is crucial to the process of changing a striving church to a thriving one. The tendency is to go to one extreme or another. Pastors often quickly move in for a confrontation that results in great damage to relationships within the church community, for in the rural/small town church mostly everyone is related to each other to some extent. This naturally pulls everyone into the showdown. No one can remain neutral in such a conflict. Bloodshed caused by this kind of a win/lose showdown has been known to leave scars not only in the church but also in the community for generations. The other tendency is to keep the peace at all costs so that all keep coming and giving. This of course spares the bloodshed, but skirts the problems leaving them unresolved only to resurface at a later time.

From the above response it is obvious that Pastor Wingrove has chosen to take neither extreme. He refuses to enable the leaders to carry on as if nothing were wrong but neither does he confront them directly in the gunfighter's mode of the old West. Rather, he keeps the situation before God in prayer, he loves them and works to keep the damage their decisions cause to a minimum, choosing to find other ways to work in the meantime. Eventually, he believes this "process" will bring about a lasting, healthy resolution.

4. *What church governmental structures were endorsed, dismantled, or altered in enabling the church to begin to grow? What was the make-up of the administrative council; how many members, who, tenure, and relationships? It would be valuable to study the board minutes to discover how "hands on" the board was and what kind of items predominate in their meetings.*

The churches are "run" by their Administrative Councils that are made up of 14 members including elders, deacons, deaconesses, and trustees. Also a member is the financial secretary, the treasurer, a recording secretary, and a complement of youth and adult delegates. An important part of the meeting is a regular review of the pastor's activities with a detailed report of hospital visits, home visits, counseling appointments, meetings, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, to name a few. Pastor Wingrove encourages the giving of these reports.

I think communication is essential—people not only relate to you because of your ministry of presence, they also relate when they know you are there for others in the parish/community, even though they might not see you. That's why reports are so important. I know monthly reports are viewed as a drag, but they are good for self-discipline, not to mention accountability. I also make sure my Ad Councils, as well as anyone else who wants one, get a detailed annual report of my activities. (2005)

The minutes presented a rather “mixed bag” of detailed inclusions and huge omissions. They testified to the hands-on management of the council when the decision of at what temperature the sanctuary thermostat should be set on Sundays, what to do about the leak in the men’s bathroom apparatus, and what to do about the hornets’ nest on the roof! Yet, there was the glaring omission in the minutes of any mention of the breaking up of the circuit. Certainly, this is an irregular practice according to *Robert’s Rules of Order* but not at all irregular to the church. A pastor is wise to understand the popularity and necessity of this kind of procedure in leading the rural/small town church so that she can work effectively with such a process.

5. *In most of the smaller churches, the power structures are entrenched and immovable. Supposing this to be the case, how were these changed: desperation? death? weariness? trust of the pastor by members of the leading families? relocation of family members? exits, either from anger or relief that it was no longer their responsibility to keep the church open?*

It is noteworthy that churches, like people, have individual traits and tendencies. In question 3 of this chapter I point out the difference in the rate of change in leadership between the two churches on the circuit. The Breakneck church is making fairly rapid progress in including newer and younger leaders to their body while the Clinton church tends to be a little less open. I suspect it is no coincidence that the growth of the latter and congregational participation lags behind as well.

6. *What role did the pastor’s personality or charisma play in the change?*

*His relational skills?*

In a rural/small town context, relational skills are paramount. A pastor can be a loner in a mega-church in a metropolitan area and have no problem with that. If he is a good organizer and is able to manage the church well, the fact that he is a “loner” really makes no difference whatever as the large majority of the congregation see him only during the morning service anyway. The bulk of the people recognize that there is no possible way in this horde of humanity, the pastor is ever going to know their name, let alone become their personal friend. For this reason, the pastor of a rural/small town parish finds himself far more in the public eye than his counterpart in the metropolis. The smaller the community, the greater exposure the pastor and his family have. The congregation knows where you buy your groceries and what groceries you buy. They know what time you go to bed at night and what time you rise in the morning. They know when you and your wife have an argument and everyone in the community knows how much money you put in the offering plate . . . even though it is “strictly confidential!”

In the rural/small town church therefore, the flock expects, no, they *demand* that the pastor relate well to people. The pastor who spends all of his time in his study may produce sermons destined for great renown, but he will never be an effective pastor of a rural/small town church.

As I questioned the people about their pastor, it was the way he related with people that the people mentioned most often. He is often seen in the community, he is seen at the hospital, and when there is a need, Pastor Joe is there. In a family-connected church, how someone relates to the family outside the congregation is important. Repeatedly, people responded that they came to the church because others in their family had attended and raved about their pastor.

I would not class Pastor Joe as a typical sanguine glad hander who never met a stranger or a person he did not like. On the surface you would not suspect the strength of his personal relational skills. But he listens attentively to those he is talking with as if they are the only people of importance to him in the world to him at the moment. His memory is excellent especially as far as personal difficulties of his congregation are concerned. Pastor Joe really loves his flock and the people sense it and thoroughly appreciate it.

Looking at the report of his activities as reported to the church each month, it is obvious that he is a hard worker. The first question is when does he have time for studying and time for his family? The second is not far different: when can we expect a bright flash in the eastern sky as he finally explodes?

We talked about this. He does not see himself as tremendously busy. Certainly, he does not waste time but has mastered the ministry of the “touch.” A pastor does not have to spend significant time visiting people as long as he stops by often. He combines his visits to the hospital by stopping in to greet anyone who is there from the community. These do not always immediately produce attendees but lets the people know that he cares and that the church cares. This results in a positive attitude from the patients and from their families and many times results in opportunities to minister years later.

One of these cases was related to me by the woman who was in charge of the spaghetti dinner the evening I helped serve at Breakneck. She lives about ten miles away. I asked her how she ever decided to attend this church from that distance. Her response was that it was because when her father had surgery, Pastor Joe had come in and ministered to him and to their family.

*His preaching skills?*

Ellen Geary's response in this area in her interview with me crystallized the response of many. She said she sometimes wonders if he is a mind reader because his sermons are so applicable to her own needs. It was stated in one of our meetings that Pastor Joe's people skills have brought people to the church, but it is his preaching skills that have kept them there. The affirmation from the others in the meeting was unanimous.

Joe is a biblical preacher, taking his theme from the text and expounding on it. He does this in a way that gets to the point without a great deal of time being spent revealing his scholarship or in demonstration of how hard he had worked in preparing the message. Rural/small town churches often have a bias against the flaunting of education so in dealing with the text he put on no airs.

Using the term "meditation" in the bulletin instead of the expected word "sermon" he has designed a softer expectation from the people as to what the message will be. Pastor Joe knows the people so well and in loving them as he does, his sermons reflect the personal touch. I believe his wide experience in counseling also proves invaluable in reaching the hearts of his people.

*His pastoring skills?*

People skills and pastoring skills are closely related. The basic difference would be that pastoring skills center more on his concern for the spiritual life of the congregation. How well do they relate to God? What things are blocking or hindering this relationship?

The strong counseling background of Pastor Joe is significant at this point. His view of change being a process over an emotional decision carries over from the church

as a whole to each individual in the church. I heard stories of his wise advice to those in severe struggles. There were reports that his counseling has had a great effect on the extended family and friends in the community. According to his annual report, in only one year he had 65 counseling relationships, was called to 25 crisis situations, made 266 home visits, in addition to 462 hospital visits. The number of people whose initial contact with the church was through the hospital visit of Pastor Joe was enough to cause one of the leaders to attribute the growth of their church to that one fact alone.

It is interesting that very few people whom I interviewed mentioned this skill, yet those who did were deeply touched personally in this manner.

*His own background and experiences?*

Along with his training in counseling, the fact that Joe's father grew up in the Breakneck area though has not lived there for some time, was helpful. Amy's family being part of the Clinton Church is kind of a mixed bag. There are the advantages of being a part of one of the larger families of the church along with the disadvantages of the *can any good thing come out of Nazareth* syndrome our Lord faced with his disciple Nathaniel in John 1:46.

One of the problems of seminary education historically has been that the student was forced to leave his or her environment and move to the environment of the school itself. While there were advantages to this, there were also disadvantages. Students tend to forget where they have come from and often begin to look at going to their rural/small town culture to pastor as a step backwards in their career. Many large churches can thank these smaller churches for nurturing their pastors in the ways of the Lord as they grew up.

Yet, at the same time these rural/small town churches continue to struggle to bring pastors in to their *perceived* to be “less than desirable pulpits.”

More important than that background, I believe, is that Pastor Joe is a student who continually makes his people the focus of greater learning and understanding. As I was preparing this project, it was Pastor Joe who suggested I read the book, *Everything in Its Path*, by Kai Erikson. This is a book written by a sociologist about the response of the community to a devastating flood that hit eastern West Virginia. It is a story about Appalachia and reading it you would think the scene is southwestern Pennsylvania. Joe Wingrove reads continually and widely.

To pastor a rural/small town church effectively it is absolutely vital to understand the people. This not only provides great rewards of understanding the culture’s values and processes, but also signals to the congregation that you care enough about them to want to get to understand them.

#### *His age?*

Given the fact that the rural/small town church normally receives the younger or the older pastors, Joe’s age would have been expected to be a plus. I believe it is, but I received no affirmation from the leadership of either church that that was the case. The churches did not seem to be resentful of being the training grounds for the novices just coming out of seminary or the last pastorate for the aged. Their attitude seemed to be more that each of these situations brought a special something to the pastorate there. The younger pastors brought enthusiasm and appealed to their youth. There was also a thought in the back of their minds that one never knows what the future would bring to a young pastor. Perhaps eventually they could say, *We knew her back when she started!*

The older pastors brought with them wisdom from years of ministry. They were able to relate on a level few young pastors could.

Joe's age carries with it an authority of experience that all ages respect. He relates well with the children who eagerly run to the front for the weekly *Children's Message*. He relates well to the older people as well, due to his keen sensitivity. Perhaps if we could freeze pastors until they hit their 40's and keep them at that time of their lives, we would have far fewer problems in pastor-congregation relationships.

*His ability to live on limited income?*

When the circuit asked him to become their full-time pastor, Joe was aware of the potential of what they could pay. He was earning much more in his counseling practice and to take the position offered would cost him considerable income. Yet, he and his wife believed that God was leading in this and accepted the position.

The salary of the pastor of the rural/small town church *must* be addressed to deal adequately with their struggles. While this does not fall directly under the purpose for this project, I have included my thoughts and possible solutions in Appendix E.

*The longevity of his pastorate? (At what point in his ministry did the growth begin?)*

While there is absolutely no evidence to prove that long pastorates automatically produce numerically growing congregations, it is rare to find a small congregation that has experienced substantial numerical growth, *and sustained that growth*, without the benefit of a long pastorate. (Schaller 1982, 71)

In studying the rural/small town church there seems to be a normal period of time before trust begins in reality. Not coincidentally, that is usually the time that growth begins as well. The situation at the Clinton/Breakneck circuit sped up the process immeasurably because when Pastor Joe came, they had come to believe that no one

would ever come to them again. Their self-esteem was at rock bottom. They felt rejected and disowned with only a matter of time until they would be forced to shut their doors for good. Then Joe came. He affirmed them repeatedly. He was *on their side*. It is not surprising that they cannot remember when they began to trust him. The fact that he came at all spoke loudly that he could be trusted by them. He came and they all believed he would stay. Hence, the growth began almost immediately there.

This is an issue, however, that needs to be addressed in the rural/small town church. Because of the limited pay scale and the limited potential, successful pastors of these churches are prime targets for the call from larger churches seeking pastors. For the rural/small town church, short pastoral tenure is a fact of life. This, of course, produces suspicion and a reluctance to buy into any new programs a pastor might wish to initiate.

As I left seminary and began pastoring the rural church in the cornfields of Illinois, the growth was nothing short of phenomenal. Room was at a premium, the kitchen was strained to the limit, and the only bathroom, installed directly off the sanctuary, was far less than soundproof. As the average attendance had more than doubled in a little over a year, more room was obviously necessary. An additional building was designed mostly by the newer people. It would house a new kitchen, bathrooms, nursery, and a fellowship area for Sunday school classes, overflow from the sanctuary, and a gymnasium. We found a contractor who would work with us and allow us to do much of the work ourselves. Even the cost was most reasonable.

We presented the proposal at the membership meeting with two of the older families on vacation in Florida. It was overwhelmingly endorsed, but in deference to the

older people who feared debt, it was agreed to build the addition only as the money came in.

Then came my education. The older families returned and you could feel their heels digging in. “Why should we build a gym for these new people? They will not remain at the church once the pastor leaves. We will be stuck with a white elephant of a building and a lot of debt.” There was no reasoning with them and you could almost feel the *whoosh* as the air of enthusiasm was being let out of the project.

It was not long after that that I received a call to another church and believed that the call was of God. I left, many of the newer people left, and the older families breathed a sign of relief that they had *dodged the bullet* once again. They had predicted what was going to happen and, indeed, to their minds that is exactly what had happened. I had unwittingly put another layer of mistrust in the hearts of the people of that church precluding any step of faith under the leadership of future pastors.

The exception was Leslie James, the farmer who had grown up in the church and was highly respected by all who attended. He knew what was happening and grieved over it. I returned to the area and stopped by his farm to talk. His insights were revealing. “You know I ache for our church. The chance was there to really move forward. Had we as a congregation stepped forward in faith we would have had our building, the new people would have remained, and I don’t believe God would have ever called you away. But,” he said with his eyes moistening a bit, “we just didn’t trust God enough.” I believe Leslie was correct in his insights.

*Which of the above traits were the most important to his ministry at the church in bringing about the change in the congregation?*

One of the groups answered this question by saying, “His people skills bring people into the church, but it’s his preaching that keeps them coming!” And everyone nodded in agreement.

Peter J. Surrey has provided some interesting insights on this matter in his book *The Small Town Church*.

. . . clergy have a tendency to seek their satisfactions outside the small church. They look outward, toward headquarters or toward meetings or toward books for their inspirations and new ideas. It is hard for parishioners to appreciate this attitude, despite the fact that they may be well educated themselves. People in small towns value pastors in terms of their ability to be known and liked. A sense of humor, an ability to read social cues, a willingness to become “one of the boys or girls”—these are what small communities value in their pastors. If questioned on such matters most search committees would deny these are the qualities they want in a pastor. But do not let such denials fool you! (Surrey 1986, 32)

He continues the thought noting that people in the small town churches look to each other for support. As pastors look outside for their support, it shows they never really belong to the church. This is one of the reasons they are always considered an outsider and being an outsider is why it is so difficult for them to develop the level of trust necessary to lead.

Against this background is Pastor Joe. In all of my interaction with him, I find a man who is self-aware of who he is. You do not sense he is coming to the church to gain anything for himself but is there with a heart to minister to the people of the community. He is much like David as described in Psalm 78:70-72:

He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with **integrity** [bolding mine] of heart; with skillful hands he led them.

*7. Finances. What was the growing curve of finances compared to the growing curve of attendance? Was there a change in attitude regarding finances? Often the vision of looking beyond ourselves begins with the matter of finances. Did this play a part in the change of attitude in the church? Was it part of the cause or part of the result of this change?*

Finances did not seem to be an issue in the change. Both of the churches saw their offerings increase even as their average worship attendance did, though at a somewhat slower rate. This can be explained by the fact that people tend to attend before they tend to give financially. Often it takes several years before a new attendee catches the vision of giving to the extent that longer members have attained over the years. This would also explain that while at the Breakneck church the average attendance has grown significantly faster than the Clinton church—121 percent versus 65 percent—giving per capita of the Clinton church has decreased less—4 percent versus 37 percent.

There seems to be an overall attitude in both churches that if something needs to be done, the finances will be there to do it. I do not believe this attitude is specifically based on a passage of Scripture such as Philippians 4:19, “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Rather, I suspect it is because many of them, due to economical struggles in that region, have had to operate this way in their personal lives. Special offerings, fund raisers, and various other practices such as asking each person contributing a gallon of paint when the church needs to be painted, all go together to give a sense of security that financial needs will be met.

This way of budgeting goes back to the “family model” of operations discussed earlier in the project. Families view budgets in a far different way than do businesses.

Certainly, families keep track of what they have and what they need, but the budgeting process lays far greater stress on the need rather than the supply. In a family, you will have a clothing budget, for instance. But when your 14-year-old suddenly outgrows two pairs of shoes over the summer months, the family will ultimately find a way to keep the boy shod for the coming school year—somehow. The greatest joy of the family is not a large bank account at the end of the year but rather it is in meeting the needs of the family.

This family budgeting attitude has not changed in the midst of the cycle of growth as both churches continue to operate without a specific spending budget, although they do predetermine how the offerings will be allocated. (pp. 102-103.)

8. *What role, if any, did the church building and facilities have in the growth?*

*Factors to consider include seating, kitchen, parking, bathrooms, community halls, picnic areas, and ball diamonds. Another aspect would include the availability of use of the church facilities for community functions such as dinners, weddings, and funerals.*

One of the tendencies of *striving* rural/small town churches is a tightening up of the control of their property. The use of their facilities is tightly monitored and renting to outside groups, even churches, is avoided or vastly expensive to the potential renters.

The *thriving* rural/small town church is thrilled to have its facilities used. Its doors open wide to the community for community events such as birthday parties, wedding receptions, and funerals. They charge only what the family desires to pay or can afford to pay. This has not been as expensive as it has been productive of good will in the community. This use of their facilities, including their large yard, has allowed the church

to again regain prominence as the center of the community. People in the area all know the layout of the church property well, so there is no trepidation when they decide to visit the church, which many of them do.

Looking ahead to the possibility of continual growth, both of the churches will be facing a shortage of space in their sanctuaries. Currently, they are both probably above the recommended 80% of capacity. While the Clinton church is built on a rather large lot with only fields surrounding it, the Breakneck building is nestled in between a mountain and the road. They are currently digging into the steep hill behind them in order to facilitate the parking of a few more cars but that space is obviously limited. In addition there is an attachment to the deed that if that ever ceases to be used as a church, the property reverts to its original owners. While growth does not come primarily because of buildings, I have found that lack of space can have a genuine detrimental effect on continued growth. People struggle to find parking places and seats for just so long before they find reasons not to attend. This is an issue that must be addressed in the not-too-distant future.

9. *Were there community factors that contributed to the growth of the church such as new housing coming into the area or new businesses hiring as examples?*

No, in fact it was just the opposite. The community is declining in population and is aging as well. Economically, things are not good with the coal industry being largely squeezed out of the energy field due to environmental concerns. A Volkswagen plant closed its doors and, while the SONY Corporation purchased the Volkswagen plant, the number of workers hired dipped significantly. There are small businesses, most of which

are struggling and a significant number of resorts in the area, but to select an area to find a *thriving church* by demographics, one would never look here.

10. *What effect did the growth of the church have on the community?*

From those I talked to, it was obvious that these communities *love* their churches. As I talked to various individuals, many of whom had only recently begun attending, they shared what an excellent reputation the churches have in the community and among their own non-attending families. In a day when Christians are seen as angry, mean, and unattractive in many quarters, this is not the case in the Clinton/Breakneck area. The fact that the church doors are open wide to everyone, no matter their background or their dress, is especially attractive to those who fear coming in the door lest the roof fall in. The community knows when there is a need; the church will step up to help no matter whether or not the person with the need is connected to the church. While it is not trumpeted widely, the community knows that part of the offerings is designated to help the needy among them.

Here as in many other areas, the pastor has shown leadership of this attitude by being available to help anyone with counseling who needs it. His regular presence in the hospital has produced a great deal of good will to those hurting as well as to their families. Fortunately, in a rural/small town church there is little competition between churches. Those needing spiritual guidance have only one choice. Unfortunately, in their fear of future extinction, many of the *striving* churches ignore these opportunities by staying so focused upon themselves and their own needs. When these churches eventually expire, they are not missed by their communities at all for they never really were a part of them.

On my visit to Breakneck, I was delighted that it coincided with one of their spaghetti dinners. Hoping to get a free dinner, I quickly volunteered to “help out!” They put me to work distributing the cake to those finishing their meals. It also provided me a perfect venue to see how the church was viewed by outsiders. From the opening moments to the final shut-down, it was a grand party. Easy interaction between members of the church and those from outside blurred the distinction. I was good naturedly teased by both groups as I was the “head man” from Findlay. I was introduced to the man who had put in the furnace and air conditioner for them and had saved them a bundle of money in doing so. Did he attend that church? No, but he was “thinking” about it. I was introduced to extended family members, making me feel I was a part of the family as well. People came from miles around as word of these dinners had gotten out.

As I served the cake, I noticed the large number of pieces was quickly being depleted. I also noted that several of the kitchen staff had stashed some away, presumably for their families who had not yet arrived. With one eye on the clock and the other eye on the desert table, I began to worry a bit. About that time, one of the men from the community told the friend from the church that he wanted another piece of cake, while I am thinking, *One per customer!* his friend went over and secured another piece for him. No embarrassment over something as trivial as a piece of cake. Yes, we did run out of cake but not before all (well almost all) of the stash was brought out for the diners. Hospitality is a family term and certain fit the rural/small town church to a tee.

*11. Was the church's connection with the community surrounding the church a factor in the growth of the church? What was the nature of these connections? Were these the “normal” ministries such as food banks and Christmas baskets? Were*

*they more innovative and community specific such as athletic leagues, community choirs, marriage seminars, or grief seminars?*

As I was sharing what was happening at the Breakneck/Clinton circuit with another pastor, he nodded and replied, "They are just going back to the old parish concept!" My first reaction was that this was something new, not something abandoned back in the middle ages. But as I considered further, I concluded that this was exactly what they were doing. The church, a single church, was in the center of the community and was the spiritual hub for the total neighborhood. The parish priest (pastor if you will) was the spiritual leader for the entire area. He performed the baby dedicating, marrying, and burying for everyone in the community. What other pastor of a congregation of 150 performs ten weddings a year and has twenty-six funerals a year? Because of this relationship, the barriers that often keep people from coming to a church were largely dismantled.

The rural/small town churches have historically been seen by the church world as old-fashioned, as out of date, and as unconnected with the modern way things are done. Countering this understanding is the cry of the current X-er generation of the importance of belonging to a group or family of some kind. While their elders had stressed the importance of belief *before* belonging, this generation argues that belief will come *upon* belonging. In earlier days, the church softball team had a requirement that the players had to attend church before they would be allowed to be a part of the team, but now seldom will church teams be allowed to form until there are non-attendees incorporated into it for mission sake. The reasoning is that joining into the fellowship of the family of God will pave the way for becoming a member of the family of God.

By being a parish or community church the people of the area know what to expect when they come in. They know how the seating was arranged from the many funerals and weddings they have attended. They know where the bathrooms are and where to take the babies when they cry. They already know the vast majority of the people who would be in attendance and doubtlessly personally know Pastor Wingrove as "Pastor Joe." To come to church is a fairly easy transition compared to most people making such a decision in other communities.

The connections are both natural and innovative. You would expect the church to be concerned about families in need, and certainly they are to provide both physical and spiritual assistance. You would expect the Christmas baskets and food distribution. But the connections go beyond that to things like community dinners, and all sorts of community events to bring the people together in the church/community setting.

*12. What were the roles of organizations in the church's growth? For example, men's and women's ministries, children's ministry, youth ministry, and music ministry.*

One of the struggles and opportunities a rural/small town church has to do with their young people. While fifty years ago farm work was pretty much sun up to sun down followed by community activities, today farming has changed and demographic trends have seen more and more young families abandoning the rural communities. This leaves fewer and fewer younger people in the area curtailing community activities. Many rural/small town churches having aged and with only one or two teens in attendance, have abandoned a youth ministry altogether. The Breakneck/Clinton circuit has done just the opposite, establishing an active youth ministry. They meet weekly on Thursday evening and participate in things such as the denomination's Quiz Teams, lock-ins, and

rock-a-thons. Youth leaders stress the summer camp program and the IMPACT program, which draws teens together from all over the denomination. Are the teens involved in the church? This response came in from the survey at the Clinton Church obviously from a teen: “Pastor is not pushy on what you wear or if you attend or not. Go Pastor Joe, you rule!”

Concern for the Sunday school situation mentioned earlier caused Pastor Wingrove to initiate a Pioneer Ministry program for the children on Tuesday evenings. While he initiated this, the laity is making it a reality.

The men’s and women’s organizations merit our attention. The women in each congregation have been a part of the Churches of God, Women’s Ministries as individual churches. They see no need to combine into a single group, although they do work together on occasion. The men had no group in either church so they began a circuit-wide fellowship called MUGS—Men United in God’s Service. Together they do service projects for the community. The most recent one was serving dinners and using the proceeds to purchase “emergency-alert” necklaces for the older people in the community who live alone. When I ate at one of these dinners several years ago I recognized that the food was great, the service fantastic, but more, it was obvious to all from the community eating there that the men were having a wonderful time working together. It was a testimony of the rich fellowship that was taking place in the circuit.

*13. What are the particular problems and advantages circuit ministries present to healthy, growing churches? The popular thinking is that the goal of circuit churches is to become large enough to exit the circuit and become a self-standing church.*

While not everything was in total accord between the two churches I visited, they were both in total agreement when it came to the suggesting of breaking up the circuit and each congregation having their own full-time pastor. “No!” Why? “We like each other!” was a common and a most telling response to my question. They enjoyed working together on community events. They enjoyed being a part of a larger organization. I would suspect that the damage the Buchanan church switch caused was predominately in the area of relationships. The comment I heard was, “It has been almost ten years since the change and still their people apologize to us whenever we meet them in public.” This was the attestation to them that they had been wronged through this process.

In this same vein, I question them if they had every thought about merging into one church. Again, the common answer was an emotional “No!” The reason given was that they each had their own story and history. In modern terms, *they each had their own DNA*. To put them together simply because they had the same pastor would ignore the many differences they have and do enjoy having.

*14. As the church began to grow, what potential dangers were out there? What were the rocks that were beneath the surface that could potentially scuttle growth?*

I asked this question at both of the churches and neither had any idea of anything that could possibly go wrong. When the seas are calm, no one worries about where the life preservers are. Yet there was evidence of potential dangers as we talked. Neither church had given much thought about what they would be doing when Pastor Joe left, hoping I suspect that it would not be in their lifetime. A thriving church built upon a single person or situation is not one poised for continual growth.

In discussing this with the pastor, he felt that the Breakneck church had progressed further than the Clinton church had in growing into lay leadership thinking. He felt that should he leave that position the Breakneck church would continue in their growth unabated. His concern was currently for the Clinton church. This belief was confirmed in my research of the two churches.

The Breakneck church had moved new personnel onto their Administrative Council and seemed open for more. The Clinton church was not concerned that few people attended any congregational meetings or gave input into the running of the church. They believed that most of the people were too busy to take on new responsibilities. I sensed some protectionism at the latter church. Couple that with the drastic decline in Sunday school attendance accepted with more or less a shrug of the shoulders and a “blame the parents” mindset, and you sense a white-knuckle grip on control. Certainly, there is no *battle* for control there but neither is there any thought of a changing of the guard. This is where Pastor Joe’s focus is in that church. He does not confront continually, but neither is he enabling them by pretending that this protectionism does not exist.

The transition from the older “pillars” of the church to newer, often younger leaders is the true test of the longevity of the thriving of the rural/small town church.

*15. Are the factors God has used to produce growth in the rural/small church reproducible or are they unique to that situation?*

I am convinced that the growth of the Breakneck/Clinton Churches is certainly reproducible. When I asked the leadership of the churches this question they all felt that they were not unique at all and that the things they were doing to thrive could certainly be

replicated in any other situation. “We love each other,” was their response to this question. “We are like a family with everyone who comes feeling welcome.”

I am sure this situation could be reproducible in other churches within a similar context. The loving, leading pastor is the catalyst to the process and I suspect the change probably would not have taken place without his leadership. I have always believed this to be true, but have never seen it so graphically validated as I have in this situation. Yet, there is more to be considered than just bring in the right pastor and good things will happen to you and to your church.

These churches have discovered their community afresh. They are exhibiting the love of Christ to those in their neighborhood. These churches are not known for what they are against. People who attend are not mean-spirited toward those who disagree with them nor is there any hint of exclusiveness in the church. People *are* welcomed and the church is a place that is attractive to all within the community.

As Randy Keffer from the Breakneck church said, “When people ask me what church I go to, without hesitation I tell them the Breakneck Church of God. They know and all seem to approve. It’s kind of nice to attend a church like that.”

These churches demonstrate the truth of Jesus words in John 13:35: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Galatians 5:22 places it even more in our context, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love . . .” Churches that thrive whether rural/small town or mega-churches in the metropolises have this in common, they bear fruit.

*16. What is the long-term prognosis of the growth of the rural/small town church?*

*How dependent is the church upon the person of the pastor? Is the growth of the*

*church likely to continue after he leaves? What things were put in place to ensure that that would actually take place?*

As I look ahead to the eventual departure of Pastor Joe, be it a year or a decade, the church will feel the loss greatly. The impact he has had on the church and the community cannot be measured. Still, there have been things put in place to assure the continued thriving of these churches to the point it is highly unlikely that they will ever return to what they were before he came.

There are policies in place that have now become “the way we’ve always done things here.” I suspect it will take a monumental turmoil to change the concern they have for the community through the dividing of the offerings. The family funeral dinners have become a part of the very nature of the church and are now expected by the community. These policies in conjunction with the attitude of service will serve the church well as she thrives in the coming days.

There are also the traditions that have been started. Rural/small towns enjoy traditions. The plowing, planting, and harvesting cycle not only sets the stage for traditions as recorded in the Torah but for today as well. Currently, there are the traditional events such as the Easter egg hunt and Autumnfest. But there are also traditional services such as the Tenabrae service during the Easter celebration, which is one of the best attended services in the church year. As these are continued, and I suspect the congregations will insist upon them, they will continue to include the community in the spiritual life of the church as well as its social life.

In this same vein, the communion service is a tradition that draws the church family close to God, to the pastor, and to each other. This too will continue to contribute to the thriving of the church no matter who is the pastor.

Most significant, however, are the people Pastor Joe has mentored in leadership. Lisa Bowman would be one example. She is 31, married, and has come to this church all her life, as have her parents, grandparents and others in her extended family. Lisa came to the church for years without ever coming to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ until only recently. Her concern is that the church has not always made this the priority it does now.

She says Pastor Joe is “a leader not a ruler. He has enough self-confidence that he doesn’t get mad if you shoot him down. He’s not one who needs to have his own way.” Lisa noted that Joe tends to see things that need to be done, finds someone who will share his vision, and then encourage him or her to take the idea and make it happen. When we talked, Joe had just done this with Lisa regarding the possibility of beginning Pioneer Ministries at Breakneck. Today, the program is up and running with Lisa and another lady at the helm.

Does this translate into other things as well? Lisa shared with me that she takes her children around to other churches for Vacation Bible Schools where she gets ideas and brings them back to Breakneck. “Innovation is necessary to make our church better,” she mused echoing her mentor!

Lisa is a young person, yet a part of the Martin family, one of the established families in the community. She is in a unique position to initiate changes without having to confront the old guard.

The danger is probably not that the people will dismantle these traditions, but that the next pastor may be too insecure to see the values of these traditions and practices and without ever understanding their significance systematically dismantle them, muttering under his breath, "*I'm sick of doing what we've always done!*" . . . and there will be great groaning in heaven.

### Conclusions

No one begins a project like this without certain presuppositions. Being a pastor, the son of a pastor, and the grandson of a pastor, deep down inside I was convinced that I would find that the key to the health of these churches would be found in the skills of the pastor, Joe Wingrove. I suspected it would be his charisma, his innate wisdom and personality "fit" that would be the bottom line in all of this. All we would have to do would be to discover another Pastor Joe and the problems of the rural/small town churches would be solved.

In one respect, my background and suspicions were confirmed. The influence of the pastor of the rural/small town church, as with any other church, I might add, was huge. You would get little argument from anyone who lived through this transition that the role of the pastor was significant. He was the one who was called to this position like Queen Esther of the scriptures, ". . . for such a time as this."

Yet, in another respect I was incorrect in my convictions. It was not the "right" pastor in the sense of personality, but the "right" pastor in the sense of sensitivity, training, and most importantly, heartbeat.

Listen to Joe's own conclusions from a recent e-mail:

I still firmly believe that we “overthink” parish ministry, make it too complicated and that even an average person who does their thing, who thinks, who is with people in community at their point of (you supply the word: need, joy, fear, doubt, uncertainty, anger etc) will stand out. The problem is that too many like to stay within their comfort zone where they have all the answers, have a God who can be manipulated (technicians vs. artists)—and miss the opportunities to learn, grow (sometimes painfully) and discover the love and sustaining power of God even in the midst of the rubble that our well-ordered life sometimes becomes. It's a creative process that connect-the-dots type of folks have trouble with since they feel they're working without a net (without realizing that the net, just not maybe THEIR net, is always there.)

Ah, this is the heart of the shepherd who is being shepherded by that Great Shepherd of the sheep.

Polio is a contagious disease that has been around, I suspect, since the beginning of time. It was in the first half of the 1900's that America faced polio's most extensive outbreak. In 1952, 60,000 cases were reported in the United States with nearly 3,000 deaths attributed to the disease. As most of these cases were children Health Departments across the country went to great lengths to prevent the potential spread of this paralyzing malady.

I will never forget the day at school when they wheeled an iron lung into our classroom. Ronald, one of my schoolmates, wore braces and used crutches because of his bout with polio but it could have been worse we were soon to discover. The nurse explained that some people with polio in order to breathe would have to spend the rest of their lives in one of these huge machines.

I suppose it was that indelible memory that swooped to the front of my mind when my dad mused, “What would have happened if we would have been satisfied with the invention of the iron lung?” Of course, in 1955, Jonas Salk created the vaccination that would wipe polio out in the western hemisphere in the next twenty years. The fact was that while the iron lung dealt with the symptoms the vaccine struck at the disease.

The focus of many of our rural/small town churches has been to *find out what is wrong and fix it*. This mode has sent pastors and church leaders scurrying after every program from every study imaginable. There is the feeling that if we do not start to bring in new people, the ones we have will die and there will be no one to continue keeping the church going. The main question that I have heard over the years is, “What can we do to keep these churches from closing?”

From the study of the Breakneck/Clinton circuit of the Churches of God, I have learned the lesson of moving the focus away from one of merely continuing existence toward one of effective ministry. “Why is the Breakneck church growing?” I would point you back to the conversation Rick Mason had with Jack Sparks mentioned earlier in this paper, “We are growing because we never hear any of the Church Growth talk in our church.” This sounds like heresy were it not for the understanding of the larger picture. These churches are not focused on numerically growing the church but on ministering to the community. It was not a focus of curing the symptoms but one of attacking the disease.

This fact was underlined when I met with the churches and questioned them about what had happened to bring about this turn-around in attendance. They simply did not know. This is an occurrence that just never happens in the vast majority of similar churches. This is so unique that the executive director of their denomination is using them as an example to lead other churches along the same path . . . and they had not noticed. Are they enjoying the experience of what God is doing in their church? Certainly. Do they know what is happening? They respond with a *non-ecclesiastical, non-market savvy, non-earth shattering* but oh so biblical answer—“We just love each other.”

I began this project with the biblical admonition that we are to bear fruit. John 15:2 carries that further by revealing that the “. . . Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

Pruning, I suspect, would never be looked on with delight by the branch if it had feelings. Pruning takes off the leafy beauty and bulky twigs leaving the branch void of anything other than that involved in the bearing of the fruit. Yet, without pruning there is limited fruit bearing. Too often the church has been more concerned with how it looks rather than with the fruit it bears.

To gain the maximum crop, it is essential for the gardener not to be concerned primarily with the feelings of the branch but with the production of the fruit. He must cut, clip, and saw sometimes ruthlessly if there is ever to be a bountiful harvest.

The Breakneck, Clinton, and Buchanan churches were moving along contentedly as they had been for nearly thirty years. True, there was little growth, in fact the numbers were dropping ever so slowly, but they were able to hire a pastor, pay the bills, and knew that come Sunday the church doors would again be open for another time of worship. The direction they were heading was exactly the same as myriads of rural/small town churches across the United States.

In 1996 *everything* changed. The pastor of the circuit, Tim Beatty, announced that the Buchanan Church had asked and received permission to leave the circuit to become a stand-alone church. Tim would become their pastor leaving the Breakneck and Clinton churches without a pastor and very uncertain as to whether or not they could afford to pay a pastor between the two of them. It was not a pleasant position in which to be.

There followed a time of soul searching as to why they should exist at all. Perhaps their time had run its course and the inevitable death of both churches was on the horizon. They talked with each other, they talked with their conference and, most importantly, they talked with God. For the first time in many years they openly examined why they should exist at all. They concluded that the churches still needed to exist and they still needed each other.

It is essential to realize that the new relationship was built on entirely different premises than they had been working with before. This was no longer only about keeping the doors open and the bills paid. *This, in fact, was not about them at all.* The churches were moving forward for others. The churches began to see themselves as serving rather than being served.

It was our Lord Himself who laid out this principle of effectiveness to his disciples in the event recorded in Matthew 20. The mother of James and John had come to Jesus with a request that her sons be given the seats to our Lord's right and left when he came into his kingdom. Here was the ultimate "me first" attitude. The other disciples heard of the request and responded in a way that proved that they too had the same attitude. Jesus by example and now by statement showed the way to great fruitfulness. ". . . and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:27-28).

It was at this precise moment that God provided the remaining churches on the circuit a godly pastor who understood them, loved them, and led them according to this new premise. Pastor Joe Wingrove came as a shepherd. He came not to be served but to

serve. He did not need their growth to affirm his personal value and the value of his ministry. He did not need their money on which to live. He was no hired hand but came as a genuine shepherd of the flock giving them the assurance that they were of value when everything else suggested the opposite.

The focus on these rural/small town churches aligned itself with the focus of the Bible. It was natural that the blessing of God would be poured out on these churches and as the early church, “. . . praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the LORD added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Romans 8:28 assures us the Buchanan event was not a surprise to God, but indeed would be used by Him to turn all three churches around from being self-serving clubs with vision amnesia into ministering, fruit-bearing churches. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” God, in his wisdom and love allowed His people to go through the pain of seeming abandonment that they might be re-created into healthy churches, doing that which pleases Him.

An essential part of this ministry mindset is the “parish ministry” concept. By going back to the parish ministry concept, some believe we are trying to turn back the clock, to unwind the complexities of social change and return to the simple life of the small communities. In reality, we are recognizing that which actually exists and building upon it rather than attempting to introduce the metropolitan life in the rural/small town society.

The gospel is notoriously a-cultural. Those in the most primitive world in the jungles of South America can relate to the gospel as easily as the most erudite of scholars in the Ivy League graduate schools.

But while the gospel is a-cultural, the methods of proclamation are not. Generally, we have no problem with the importance of speaking in the hearer's language and have spent millions, no, billions of dollars in our passion to translate the Bible into every language. In Acts 2, even the Holy Spirit demonstrated the need for all the hearers at Pentecost to hear the message of the gospel in their own tongue.

In the late 1980's I was invited to speak at a pastors' conference in Belgium for pastors and missionaries. As I taught through an interpreter, I watched the missionaries interacting. It was there I realized that while the enormity of learning a different language was difficult, the learning of the culture was every bit as difficult yet even more important. Words provide the communication but it is culture that makes the connection with the message. To say the right words in the wrong way at the improper time make even the finest message sounding like the proverbial *gong and cymbal!*

The message of the mega-church is a message primarily for those who are of the generation of baby boomers and who usually live in the metropolitan areas of our country. To assume this is *the* way to minister to all people and the only way to *do* church leaves the large majority of our churches floundering in ineffectiveness.

Joe Wingrove caught the vision of what it takes to minister in the rural/small towns of America. These people *do* know their neighbors here. They *do* care what happens to the family in the next block. They *are not* ready to declare large size and

enormous finances to be the bottom line of success. These are people of a community who are tightly bound to each other by history, by proximity, and by values.

Far too often, we have attacked these cultures as being old-fashioned with the new things we have learned in studying the exciting churches of our day. We have egotistically thrown out the way they did things in the rural/small town church culture without even a glance backwards. The tensions were explained away with a flippant yet usually tacit response. We are educated, you are not. We know best!

So pastors come and go, the congregations grow older and smaller, and turmoil reigns. Denominational leaders scratch their heads, merge some of these churches and close others. White frame structures continue to dot the American landscape but they are now antique shops, warehouses, condos, and museums rather than the *bethels* of God.

Pastor Joe has been successful with this paradigm. Is the answer now to transpose this model to other churches in rural/small town churches across the country? To suggest this answer would have totally missed the point of the success of the Breakneck/Clinton circuit. This model was developed out of a heart of love by the pastor for his flock. It is obvious that he genuinely loves them deeply and has led them from that perspective. Loving is not just gooey sentimental words but a sensitivity to those who are loved. Love asks, "What makes them function?" Love listens to their answers. Love hears their heartbeat. Love corrects when correcting is necessary but never harshly or bitterly. Love encourages, love protects, love guards and guides the flock. The model comes from such a heart. Any other way to produce models is forced and, because of that, flawed.

I heard the story of a pastor who was called to a small church not far from the Clinton/Breakneck circuit. It was a rural/small town church that was so remote that no

one could easily give directions to get there but after attempting to do so would usually say, "Just follow me." The church had a difficult time securing a pastor but finally found a man who was willing to live on a small salary and regularly drive back into the church area week by week. The only problem was, he was untrained and could not preach well at all.

The church began to grow as the pastor's love for the people brought that little church to life. After a period of time, the denominational leader approached one of the elders for a progress report. The church was overjoyed with their pastor and sang his praises to the sky. The leader put the big question to the elder, "But, what about his preaching? Is he improving?" The elder thought for a minute and responded with a dismissive laugh, "Oh, I don't know if he is getting better or if we're just getting used to him!"

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13: 8 and 13)

### **Recommendations**

I would first of all recommend a study of the generational thinking and its effect on transitioning leadership of the rural/small town church. It is one thing to pass the leadership mantle from parents to children, but it is quite another thing if the children are radically different in worship styles and philosophies than are their parents. Neither of the churches studied have significantly addressed this problem simply because they did not have to. The closest thing to this is the conflict over the Sunday school at the Clinton Church. Pastor Joe is married to one of the daughters of the church. His desire to move the Sunday school into the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been met with resistance and even anger. As I

posed this problem of bringing in the younger leaders into this department the current superintendent told me he was looking toward a replacement. Probing further it was obvious that the person he was thinking about was a non-leader and was definitely a person who would not rock the boat. The current leader's obvious goal was if he could not lead, he would put a person in who would lead as he *would* have led.

Transitions are not only good but are inevitable. The passing of time leaves us with no choice in the matter. It would seem wise for further study of a rural/small town church that has faced this situation and made the generational transition smoothly.

Secondly, and closely following the previous concern is the factor of the pastoral transition. What will happen when Pastor Joe leaves for whatever reason? I have covered some of this concern in my project, noting the policies and traditions that have been put in place and individuals the Pastor has mentored, but further study of this process with actual events rather than suppositions would prove helpful.

Thirdly, there needs to be a shift in the thinking regarding rural/small church ministry. Currently, these opportunities are seen by many seminary students as less than attractive. The problems are often exaggerated while the benefits seem to be minimized. The feeling is that a pastor in a rural/small town church is forgotten and will be "stuck" there for a long period of time. Bigness is the motto of our day in the church world. The feeling is that it does not matter if a church is healthy or producing fruit as long as it is growing numerically. We must find a way to bring about a different mindset to our future pastors and I suspect this needs to begin in our seminary classrooms.

Fourthly, along this line, I would recommend that our seminaries take seriously the training of future rural/small town church pastors. There must be training in effecting

change without destroying the body. There must be training in conflict management. Leadership as it is currently taught in our schools depends heavily on the business model. There needs to be a shift in at least a section of this tract toward leading the family model. *Robert's Rules of Order* must be seen as a suggested procedure, not the end all it has often become.

I would recommend that the Doctor of Ministry program should include an intensive on various church models with at least one day dedicated to the rural/small town church (. . . with Pastor Joe Wingrove as an adjunct professor on the subject). I believe such a course could inspire "further study" in this area, which is so largely overlooked in the church world today.

Fifthly, we must find a way to introduce and train our "Pastor and Church Relations" committees in our various conferences to the differences that exist between the different kinds of churches. I believe that a great many pastors are selling insurance policies today because they were placed in pulpits without consideration of their backgrounds, gifts, and visions. While none of us would every suggest that one size fits all when it comes to the placement of pastors, in actual practice we often act as if there is no difference between various churches.

Finally, I believe the above training could be encouraged by my writing a booklet for these committees based upon the conclusions gained from this project. This is a project already on the drawing board!

APPENDIX A  
CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY

1. How long have you attended this church?

Circle one:

Less than 1 year /2-5 years /5-10 years /10-25 years 25+ years

2. How far do you live from the church?

Circle one:

Less than 1 mile 2-5 miles 5-10 miles More than 10 miles

3. Your age.

Circle one:

Under 10 11-20 21-35 36-50 51-65 Over 65

4. Approximately what percentage of your income do you give to this church?

Circle one:

Less than 1% 2-5% 6-10% More than 10%

5. What church offices or duties have you been responsible for in the last ten years?

6. What line of work are you in or if you are retired, what line of work were you in before your retired?

7. How many of your family members (relatives) attend this church?

Circle one:

1-3 4-6 7-10 More than 10

8. Briefly write what you feel the number one reason this church is growing.

APPENDIX B  
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been coming to this church?
2. What attracted you here?
3. How is the church perceived by the community around us? Do you think it is seen as inclusive or exclusive?
4. What kind of things does the church do to foster this community relationship?  
How do people come in contact with the church?
5. What kind of impact for Jesus is this church making to those in this area?
6. What programs or ministries are particularly effective here?
7. Why do you think the church is growing?
8. Personally, what is making the greatest impact for spiritual growth in your own life?

## APPENDIX C

### RESUME OF PASTOR JOSEPH WINGROVE

#### **EDUCATION**

1972-1976 BA Liberal Arts, California University of Pennsylvania.

1988-1990 M.Div. (42 credits earned) Pittsburgh Theological Seminary 1991-1994

University of Pittsburgh. Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic. Family Therapy Certification.

1993-1996 Philadelphia Child Guidance Center, Philadelphia, PA. Family Home Based Therapy.

“It has been my experience that once many people get a degree they just stop . . . know it and don't read anything much that doesn't fit what they already ‘know.’ I think it's good to read outside our conceptions/beliefs/disciplines, read stuff that we may not agree with to keep the mental juices flowing and hey, maybe even pick up a thought or two.”

Trainings and workshops attended: Forensic Psychology; Spirituality In Addiction and Recovery; Spirituality In Health Care; Family Systems Theory; Teen Suicide Intervention Conference; Religious Commitment and Spirituality in Psychotherapy; Co-Dependency - Healing the Human Condition; Perfect Sons and Silent Daughters - Adult Children of Alcoholics; Fire in the Belly - On Being Male; Psychotherapeutic Techniques

When Working with the Adolescent and Family; and HIV: Psychological Aspects Re: Treatment.

**1991-1997 Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services Inc., Uniontown, PA 15401.** I have worked in the following areas: outpatient therapist, private practice therapist working in association with Dr. Patricia Gainor, bachelor's level family therapist, masters level family therapist, Student Assistance Program, Adolescent Partial Hospitalization Program.

**2000-Ongoing: Albert Gallatin Hospice, Uniontown, PA 15401**

I serve as a spiritual counselor working with terminally ill patients and their families as they prepare/process the end stages of this life. Work includes emotional/spiritual support, caregiver support, grief work, education, communication, reconciliation, linkage with spiritual support and funeral support/officiant as requested.

**Other Trainings and Workshops:**

- \*University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown-Forensic Psychology
- \*Spirituality In Addiction and Recovery-Dr. David Else
- \*Spirituality In Health Care-Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Conference
- \*Ethics-St Francis Hospital
- \*Family Systems Theory-WPIC Dr. P. McCullough
- \*Reality Therapy-Dr. Fitz-George Peters

**Other WPIC Trainings:**

- \*Teen Suicide Intervention Conference.
- \*Recognition and Treatment of Post Partum Psychological D/O.
- \*Family Separation Theory: Applications to Treatment - Dr. P. McCullona.

\*Social/Problem Solving Skills and Conduct D/O Children.

\*New Frontiers in the Treatment of Bipolar D/O.

\*Religious Commitment and Spirituality in Psychotherapy.

**Other Trainings:**

\*Seton Hill College: "Perfect Sons and Silent Daughters - Adult Children of Alcoholics"

- Dr. Robert Ackerman.

\*"Spirituality in Addiction and Recovery" - FCDA - Rev. David Else.

\*Adelphoi Inc. - "Reality Therapy/Control Therapy" - Dr. Fitz George Peters.

\*"Info Exchange: Dual Disorders" - Dr. Bert Pepper.

\*St. Francis Hospital – "Ethics"

\*Allegheny General Hospital - "Co-Dependency - Healing the Human Condition" - Dr. George Whitfield.

\*Shippensburg University - "Training of Trainers" - Certified Trainer for Pennsylvania State Core Competencies in Child Welfare System.

\*East Liberty Presbyterian Church - "Fire in the Belly - On Being Male" - Sam Keen.

\*Omega Institute, Rhinebeck, NY - "Love in Action: A Retreat For Helping Professionals" led by Thich Naht Hahn.

\*Adventure Ropes Course Instructors Certification-Jumonville PA Ropes Course.

\*Respite Care - Try Again Homes.

\*Non-Violent Crisis Intervention.

\*"HIV: Psychological Aspects Re: Treatment" - Jan Melcher.

\*"Psychotherapeutic Techniques When Working with the Adolescent and Family."

\*Seton Hill College - "Strong at the Broken Places" - Linda Sarford.

\*Sandoz Inc. - "Boarding Care."

### **EMPLOYMENT**

#### **1988-Ongoing: Churches of God, General Conference**

I have served with this denomination since my field education days at seminary. I served initially as an annual licentiate and was granted full lifetime ordination in November 1998 following satisfaction of the ordination requirements. I have served as sole pastor of the churches to which I have been assigned, performing all functions including working with the families of chronically and terminally ill patients. I have chosen to continue my dual career of ministry and counseling.

#### **1991-1997 Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services Inc., Uniontown, PA 15401**

I have worked in the following areas: outpatient therapist, private practice therapist working in association with Dr. Patricia Gainor, bachelor's level family therapist, master's level family therapist, Student Assistance Program, Adolescent Partial Hospitalization Program.

#### **2000-Ongoing: Albert Gallatin Hospice, Uniontown, PA 15401**

I serve as a spiritual counselor working with terminally ill patients and their families as they prepare/process the end stages of this life. Work includes emotional/spiritual support, caregiver support, grief work, education, communication, reconciliation, linkage with spiritual support and funeral support/officiant as requested.

### **PERSONAL**

Married for twenty-two years to Amy Haines-Wingrove, the father of two children: Christine, age 22, an Oncology RN/BSN for UPMC and Benjamin, age 12, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader

in the Connellsville Area School District. Interests include: reading, writing, gardening, backpacking, traveling, camping and sports.

## APPENDIX D

### JOSEPH WINGROVE 2005 EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT

#### THE ALLEGHENY CONFERENCE

The Allegheny Conference recently did an evaluation of each of their pastors by way of their congregation. The leaders are given a list of twenty questions rating their pastor on a scale of 1-5 with one being the lowest and five being the highest. The questions are based upon four categories of ministerial responsibilities and abilities; Specific Ministry Skills, Relational Aptitude, Ministry Building, and Personal Distinctives.

With a five being perfection, Joe's average score from the 14 questionnaires was 4.7. Eight of the fourteen did give him perfect scores. Three were less than 4.5 with one of those being an uncharacteristic 3.55.

The comments from Dr. Ricky Mason, the Director of the conference, were very affirming. "Pastor Wingrove's evaluation was very high as the above numerical averages indicate. Many evaluation forms came with comments communicating much support and appreciation for the pastor. There is little to say except that what Pastor Joe is doing is having a tremendous effect on the church and the community. There was *[sic]* some who expressed concern as to how long he will be staying, that is they don't want to see him go but understand that pastors do move on from time to time. These comments were presented in a positive light, but with concern for the long term future of the church. It is

always a pleasure to see a pastor who has had such a positive impact on a congregation of people and the community surrounding the church.”

In the Recommendations and follow-up section, Dr. Mason continues: “Pastor Joe is encouraged to continue ministry in the way that he has up to this point. However, as the church continues to grow, everyone should understand that so will his obligations as a shepherd. The church should consider doing additional evaluations on an annual basis to establish a comparison and trend. Pastor Joe is to be commended for an excellent job!”

## APPENDIX E

### PAYING THE RURAL/SMALL TOWN CHURCH PASTOR

The salary of the pastor of the rural/small town church *must* be addressed to adequately deal with their struggles. In the past the ridiculously low salaries were explained in various ways. “If she was in it for the money, she would never have gone into the pastorate!” “He doesn’t get much money here, but oh the eternal benefits he will receive.” “We provide a nice house and she does not have to drive far to work.”

Several years ago the oil companies struggled to raise the prices of gasoline to a dollar a gallon but were met with a huge resistance by the buying public. There was a mindset of the consumer that the price of gas should never go above a dollar a gallon. Then came the gas shortages and OPEC and the consumer began to have to pay or go without. Slowly, the gas prices have risen until today a station selling gas for \$3.00 a gallon will be greeted with long lines of people waiting to fill their tanks. As long as the mindset is that pastors are a cheap cost, the rural/small town churches will set their budgets accordingly.

None of these churches have seen their electric or heating bills decline or even remotely remain at the same level, yet they continue to heat their buildings and use electricity. They have no option so they pay the bills as presented. The minister’s salary is their decision and their mindset allows this to be the “fudge factor” for meeting expenses.

While most analysis would conclude that a church must have over 100 giving attendees in order to secure a full-time pastor, they seldom recognize that the rural/small town church is often largely subsidized. Former members who pass away often leave part if not all of their estates to keep their church functioning after they have gone. Others who move to the larger metropolitan areas still send their tithes back home to enable the church to continue. Because of the survival mindset so prevalent in the rural/small town churches, often these monies are saved or held back for the proverbial rainy day rather than using it to increase the salary of the pastor. This is the “cookie jar” mentality the previous depression generation held to so tenaciously.

In harmony with the mindset that pastors need not have large salaries is the historic exchange concept. The salary is not large, but there is often a bag of tomatoes or sweet corn left on his porch at harvest time and when the farmers do their butchering, the preacher often gets a quarter of beef. They often will say, “The pastor here probably will not get rich, but she will never go hungry!” This has soothed a lot of consciences over the years and provided ammunition for keeping the pastor’s salary at subsistence level or below. One church in Iowa was furious that they could not get a full time pastor to come and work for \$100 a week plus the use of a parsonage. That situation held the record for an outdated mindset until a church in Pennsylvania was equally as angry at the lack of dedication of ministerial students who would not consider a plan for full-time ministry for a parsonage and \$50 per week!

Obviously, few gas stations accept a bag of tomatoes or a dozen ears of sweet corn for gasoline any longer, nor are many hospitals open to payment with a side of beef. The world has changed and while congregational leaders know it in their businesses,

somehow there is a disconnect when it comes to paying their pastors. Education in this area is coming slowly, mostly by the lack of being able to secure a capable pastor at current salary levels.

Along this same line is the historic use of parsonages. This enables the church to pay a smaller salary, but deprives the pastor of any equity of owning a house himself or herself. Some of the parsonages are well kept and beautiful while others are not. Some of them fit the pastor's family while others prove too small or too large. Finding a way to help the pastor secure his or her own house by providing a down-payment loan from the money gained by the sale of the parsonage would go a long way toward bridging the gap of what they can pay and what the pastor needs.

Another alternative would be to re-examine the need for the full-time status of a pastor. There are advantages for the tent maker as no less than the apostle Paul affirmed in 1 Thessalonians 2 that he worked night and day so as not to be a burden to any of them at that church although he repeatedly affirmed he had a right to claim living expense from the church. If it is a choice between ministry and not ministry because of the desire for a full-time position, the passion of the call on the part of the pastor should be questioned. If it is the issue of the church desiring a full-time pastor versus a part time-one, there is a need to examine the reasons for this desire. If the reasons stand up under scrutiny, then I believe that a step of faith can be expected on the part of the congregation to hire a full-time pastor with the confidence that God will supply their ability to meet the cost of one. Too often the step of faith is expected by the pastor alone to live on what they pay her, rather than on the entire body.

But the supply side is not the only issue that needs to be addressed. The attitude of the pastor is changing as well. It used to be that the call of God on a person's life was what drove them into ministry. When a person sensed the call of God the financial package was not the primary issue. There seems to have been a change here as well as the first question often asked is with regards to financial benefits (salary amount, health insurance, pensions, vacation, for example, the degree of family satisfaction – schools, jobs for wife, and housing prospects . . . ).

Pastor Rick Zickefoose, a man with a young family was invited to become the pastor of the Brighton Church of God in Brighton, Iowa. The church was in the small town where he grew up and he understood the financial limitations of not only the church but also the town. From the start he laid out the proper perspective. He did not see it as a congregational problem nor as a pastoral problem but as a church problem. As they discussed what they would be paying him, he set forth this suggestion. "Johnna (his wife) and I will live as cheaply as we can if you and your families will give as much as you can." The congregation understood the totality of the problem and rose to the occasion as did the Zickefooses. The sacrificial giving and wise spending grew together until the needs were met and more. By the end of Pastor Zickefoose's ministry there, the church had been able to not only meet the expenses of having a full-time pastor but built a new church building as well.

Typically, the rural/small town church does not do very well in the areas of pastoral compensation or opportunities for jobs for the pastor's mate compared to their urban sister churches. Often the pastor who does not receive a call from a larger, wealthier church "settles" for the rural/small town church. *Settling* for a position is

seldom, if ever, satisfying. Pendulum swings are inevitable and I suspect that in the past some churches took advantage of a pastor's passion to keep from paying him or her for what he or she was worth. This has resulted in the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction with fewer and fewer pastors willing to live on the subsistence pay some churches can offer.

Lyle Schaller in his book *From Geography to Affinity* has listed fifteen suggestions to solve the financial problem in the rural/small town churches.

- a) Part-time trained lay ministers?
- b) A financial subsidy from the denomination to enable each congregation to benefit from the leadership of a full-time and seminary-trained resident pastor?
- c) Part-time pastors concurrently enrolled in college or seminary?
- d) Share a full-time and fully credentialed pastor with another congregation of the same denomination?
- e) Share a full-time and fully credentialed pastor with another congregation of a different denomination?
- f) Share a full-time and fully credentialed pastor with two or more other congregations?
- g) Share a part-time student pastor with two or more small churches?
- h) Share the leadership of a clergy couple with two or more congregations?
- i) Share the leadership of a ministerial team serving several small churches?
- j) Develop its own indigenous leadership from among its own constituents?
- k) Request the leadership of a three-person trained lay team who are members of a large church that specializes in enlisting, training, placing, nurturing, and supporting lay volunteer teams to serve small churches?
- l) Rely on part-time semi-retired ordained ministers?
- m) Turn to ordained ministers with a seminary degree who are serving in full-time positions (teaching, chaplaincy, etc.) that does not require them to work Sundays, who desire to serve as a part-time pastor?
- n) Call the spouse who is a seminary graduate and want to combine the roles of a part-time pastor and a part-time homemaker while the other spouse is the primary breadwinner for that family, or
- o) Rely on the "bottom of the barrel" among the pastors in the ministerial marketplace? (p. 54)

In discussing the above with Pastor Wingrove, he urged me to also consider the value of the rural/small town church pastor having a second part-time job in the community. Obviously, the second job would need to give the flexibility to minister to the

needs of the church, but can also enable the pastor to relate to the community in ways that simply being a pastor could never accomplish. Joe serves as chaplain for the local hospice and while receiving some financial benefits, the far larger reward is the opportunity to minister to the community in times of death and bereavement. He related that this also brings stronger identification with the community at large, making him more of the “family” and less of an outsider than he would otherwise be considered.

The resolution of this problem will not be done in these few short pages. I would suggest that both the church and the pastor be up-front and open with expectations as they seek together to craft a fair and satisfying resolution to this problem.

## APPENDIX F

JOINED TOGETHER – JULY 2006

### *(Denominational Monthly Newsletter Article)*

I have been having the time of my life recently as I am working on my project for my Doctor of Ministry degree. Due to the size and location of so many of our churches, I chose to write on the "Refocusing of the Rural, Small Town Church."

Originally, my study was going to encompass several churches in each of our Conferences, but the wisdom of my advisors suggested I pare it down to only a couple of churches. So, I selected the Clinton and Breakneck Churches of God in the Allegheny Region. These churches pastored by Joe Wingrove are located in Western Pennsylvania's coal mining region. Unfortunately, the coal mining business has fallen on hard times and jobs are hard to find there. The population is declining and that which remains is growing older on an average. BUT these two churches have grown by nearly 75 percent in worship attendance during the last decade!

I know what you are thinking . . . did other churches in the area close, sending people to these churches? Nope. Did a new factory open with new jobs? Wrong again. Ah, they chucked the piano and organ and brought in a praise band? Sorry, still robed choirs that sing stirring anthems! Small groups? Sunday school is about it. What's their secret? Read carefully . . . they first of all have a deep love for Jesus Christ. The celebration of the Lord's Table brings an excitement you could cut with a knife.

Secondly, they really love each other... their greeting time could last for hours! Finally, they love their community. Four percent of their offerings are earmarked to help the needy in their neighborhoods. They host funeral dinners for every family in the area—whether or not they attend the church is immaterial! Their buildings are considered community buildings—a donation for their use is accepted but not required. Everyone in the area considers these churches to be their churches.

John Richter had lived across the road from the Breakneck Church for 47 years without ever attending. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Pastor Joe visited him and led him into a relationship with the Savior. Understanding the rural/small town tendency of not allowing people to change, I asked John if it was difficult to now walk across that road to church. "Not at all," came his response, "I've known these people all my life." These churches are what we mean by healthy churches—making more and better disciples!

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