

# The Practices of a Thriving Rural Church



## How Do We Measure Up?

An interactive experience towards the creation of a ministry tool to assist rural pastors and denominational leaders to better understand how to recognize and affirm practices of health and wellness in the ministry of a rural church.



The Rural Church Pastors Network  
[www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com](http://www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com)

# Welcome!!

We are delighted you have taken time to make an investment in your life and leadership. The Rural Church Pastors Network creates events for rural pastors focusing on both relevant ministry matters and pastoral personal health and wellbeing. All courses are designed by a team of seasoned and committed rural pastors who ensure each RCPN gathering offers a meaningful experience that is not only encouraging, but can be used in your rural church setting.



This isn't just about training, however, each RCPN event is designed as an "experience" for sharing current reality in ministry, for rich and warm fellowship, for relational networking, and for prayerful support.

If you were to place your church on a continuum between declining, surviving and thriving, where would you place it?

**Declining** \_\_\_\_\_ **Surviving** \_\_\_\_\_ **Thriving**

On what basis did you determine your church's placement? \_\_\_\_\_

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This course's theme focuses on the *Practices of a Thriving Rural Church* and is designed to engage you in a discussion related to how we measure the health, well-being and effectiveness of a rural church ministry. Throughout the course of our time together, you will be invited to consider making a paradigm shift as we move away from a strictly **quantitative** way of measuring the rural church to a **qualitative** way of evaluating whether or not a rural church is indeed healthy.

It is our conviction that using the traditional 3 "Bs" (buildings, bucks, & bodies) is not a helpful way to find out if a rural church is either thriving or merely surviving. Such quantitative measurements fail to take into consideration, for example, the steady migration of population – and particularly the next generation – from rural to urban settings. It's tough to maintain "numbers" when that kind of demographic shift is happening, and yet the quality of life in a given rural congregation might be very good. So, we believe that a new way of evaluating the church in its rural context is necessary.

Because research has revealed a lack of common language in discerning thriving rural churches, it is our conviction that a new set of lenses needs to be identified and explored as a basis for any discussion relating to rural church health. As we have already noted, this will require a paradigm shift for us and for our denominational leaders as we begin to think qualitatively rather than quantitatively in relation to the rural church.



What we are presenting today is not a finished product. In fact, because there is not a recognized standard for evaluating the ability of a rural church to *thrive* in its ministry context, we want to develop a tool which will do so – and we are asking you to be part of the process in helping that to happen.

To guide our discussion, nine areas or *practices* are going to be explored as points for consideration whereby common language can be developed in understanding what a thriving rural church looks and feels like. As we who are practitioners expand our understanding of meaningful indicators for rural ministry health, we can then help denominational leaders to gain deeper understanding for meaningful engagement with those of us who faithfully serve in rural ministry.

As you reflect on the following practices, you are invited to picture in your mind's eye the essence of a thriving church functioning as the body of Christ throughout the rural landscape of our nation.

### Our Goals for This Course

- To provide rural pastors with a 'day away experience' from your normal ministry location... with the prayer you will be refreshed and renewed through our time together.
- To offer encouragement and support to pastors as they consider their current rural church ministry setting.
- To gain a fresh appreciation for the uniqueness of rural based ministry.
- Laughter and fellowship will permeate our gathering as we learn, eat and pray together.
  
- The belief there is a great deal we can learn from each other – from mistakes we have made and lessons we have learned along the way!
- To encourage networking between pastors for continued contact and accountability.
- Take time to consider: As we gather today – what are your goals – why did you come – what are the needs of and burdens on your heart?

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# Practices of a Thriving Rural Church

The following nine areas will be the focus of our discussion



## 1. CELEBRATES AUTHENTIC WORSHIP AND THE PROCLAMATION OF GOD'S WORD

The church community joins together for authentic worship and lives under the authority of God's Word as the basis of Christian faith and practice.

## 2. DEMONSTRATES SPIRITUAL VITALITY

The church family is undergirded by earnest prayer, and finds empowerment through the Holy Spirit in leading towards spiritual maturity and the reproduction of disciples.

## 3. PRACTICES BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP

The church shares life and faith together, caring for the church family through practical expressions of love, through good times & bad.

## 4. LEADS WITH COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

The church is led by a relational pastor, with the support of a spiritually minded and engaged leadership team.

## 5. EQUIPS FOR MEANINGFUL MINISTRY AND MISSION

The church equips its family for ministries that reflect their spiritual gifts, values and resourcefulness.

## 6. CONNECTS INTENTIONALLY WITH ITS COMMUNITY

The church identifies with its surrounding community through practical expressions of authentic Christian faith and practice.

## 7. UNDERSTANDS ITS HISTORY

The church reflects on its historical roots and uses its heritage as a relational backdrop to embrace its unfolding mission and ministry to live 'in community' with its community.

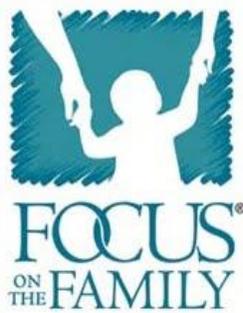
## 8. NAVIGATES THROUGH CHANGE

The church remains resilient in navigating through the reality of change and conflict by weathering the challenges of its changing culture and demographics.

## 9. EXERCISES RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP OF ITS GOD-GIVEN RESOURCES

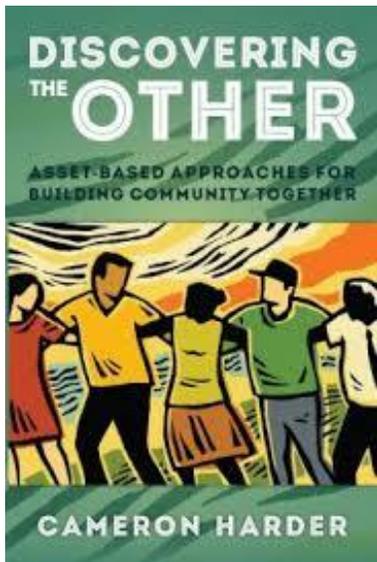
The church maximizes the full potential and creatively uses the God given resources entrusted to it.

Please be aware these nine practices are only suggested points of discussions – do you sense anything is missing? What would you add – Now, together, let's consider each practice and how it expresses the essence of a Thriving Rural Church within our own ministry context.



### One of our Ministry Partners – Focus on the Family

The RCPN wants to express thanks to our friends at Focus on the Family for their deep commitment to support and encourage pastors. Visit them at [Focusonthefamily.ca](http://Focusonthefamily.ca) for a full list of their resources. Ever find yourself in crisis and need immediate help and assistance? Call their confidential call-in counselling line at 1.888.5.CLERGY



### Recommended Resource:

#### **Discovering the Other – Cameron Harder** **Asset Based Approaches for Building Community Together.**

You would do well to have a highlighter in your hand as you read through this book. You will soon realize each chapter puts things in perspective related to rural ministry and the opportunities that are inherent in a church family and its surrounding community that will prove to be in the ingredients necessary for a rural church to thrive.

Each chapter challenges the reader to think ‘outside of the traditional box’ in viewing ministry. The practical tools of Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping will prove valuable for rural churches to realize their full potential in the coming days.

## The Rural Church Pastors Network

Since its inception, the RCPN leadership team has prayerfully held this ministry with open hands before the Lord for His leading. It has been humbling to see pastors from four provinces and twenty denominations drawn to connect with a regional RCPN hub meeting over the past 3 ½ years. We believe the RCPN will develop to its full potential as regional hubs are developed through local rural pastors accepting responsibility, twice a year, to call pastors together in their region and host an event.

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## **Practice One... A Thriving Rural Church**

### **CELEBRATES AUTHENTIC WORSHIP AND THE PROCLAMATION OF GOD'S WORD**

The church community joins together for authentic worship and lives under the authority of God's Word as the basis of Christian faith and practice.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. What does "authentic" worship look like in a rural church? How did you determine that?

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3. How does your church's theology effect its understanding of worship? (eg. Liturgical or free worship; sacrament centered, or word or worship centered, etc.)

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4. How would you describe the "engagement" of the worship in your church? What affects the tone of worship in your church? (e.g. somber, joyful, stately, warm, welcoming, etc.)

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5. What correlation is there between how your congregation views the Bible/God's Word and how the congregation functions as a group of believers?

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of its practice in the celebration of worship and the proclamation of God's word, what are the essential elements that need to be present in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## Practice Two... A Thriving Rural Church

### DEMONSTRATES SPIRITUAL VITALITY

The church family is undergirded by earnest prayer, and finds empowerment through the Holy Spirit in leading members towards spiritual maturity and the reproduction of disciples.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. Share how the ministry of prayer impacts the life of the church in that we see God's hand at work as opposed to ministry done in and through our own strength.

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3. Describe your church's theology of the Holy Spirit and how is it evident in the life of the congregation?

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4. How does your church and/or church leadership practice dependency on the Holy Spirit?

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5. How is spiritual maturity measured/determined/discerned in your church context?

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6. How does your church have a strategy in making disciples

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of its demonstration of spiritual vitality, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## Practice Three... A Thriving Rural Church

### PRACTICES BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP

The church shares life and faith together, caring for the church family through practical expressions of love, through good times & bad.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. What practices are in place to help your congregants develop connections with each other? How do we know if this is taking place in the life of the church? What do you do if you sense it isn't happening?

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3. What are the greatest hindrances to Biblical fellowship happening in your context? Give examples (i.e. church history, polity, demographics, geography, etc.)

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4. What one thing would you change that would have the greatest impact in helping your congregation do a better job of being "family?"

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5. What obstacles might hinder such change from happening? How could they be overcome? How does the church stay together in tough times and/or reach out to those estranged from the church family?

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of its practice of biblical fellowship, what are the essential elements that need to be present in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## Practice Four... A Thriving Rural Church

### LEADS WITH COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

The church is led by a relational pastor, with support of a spiritually minded and engaged leadership team.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. What does an effective leadership team look like in a rural church?

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3. What if you are not a “relationally” gifted pastor? To what extent there hope for you? How can your leadership team make up that deficit?

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4. To what extent are the “official” leaders, the “true” leaders of the church? Where does the real power lie? How do you work with that within your context?

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5. How would you recognize leaders that are “spiritually minded” or “engaged?”

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6. When filling leadership positions, does your church have a “pool” of leaders to draw from, or do you end up taking the first “warm body” who will say ‘yes’ to a position? How can we bring people along into leadership?

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For your rural church to be considered ‘THRIVING’ in terms of its committed leadership, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## Practice Five... A Thriving Rural Church

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### EQUIPS FOR MEANINGFUL MINISTRY

**AND MISSION** The church equips its family for ministries that reflect their spiritual gifts, values and resourcefulness.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. What does meaningful ministry look like within your church context?

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3. What does the term “mission” mean to you and your church family? How does your church engage in the Great Commission both locally and globally?

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4. How do you currently measure or evaluate these? (i.e. number of people doing “ministry”; emphasis/money given to missions; etc?)

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5. How do you determine the spiritual gifts of your people? How do you help them discern how God has gifted them?

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6. To what extent do you creatively release people to do what God has called them to do.

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For your rural church to be considered ‘THRIVING’ in terms of its equipping for ministry and mission, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## **Practice Six... A Thriving Rural Church**

### **CONNECTS INTENTIONALLY WITH ITS COMMUNITY**

The church identifies with its surrounding community through practical expressions of authentic Christian faith and practice.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. In your church, is this something you do 'intentionally' or does it just happen naturally? (ie. To what extent are individuals doing this on their own initiative? Do they see it as ministry or just part of life? Do you know who from your church is 'doing what' in your community? Do other people know? Give examples...

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3. How does your church celebrate connection with your church community?

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4. In your community how do you "practically" express/measure the impact of "a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name?"

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5. How do you communicate that community connection has great value? To what extent do you measure the worth of such involvement if no one comes to church after serving those in your community?

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of its equipping for ministry and mission, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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**Practice Seven... A Thriving Rural Church**

**UNDERSTANDS ITS HISTORY** The church reflects on its historical roots and uses its heritage as a relational backdrop to embrace its unfolding mission and ministry to live ‘in community’ with its community.

Consider:

- 1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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- 2. To what extent are you aware of the history of your church?

- a. What is the story related to when it started?

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- b. Who were the families or significant people who planted it?

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- c. What was its original purpose? Why did it come into being?

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- d. What are some significant events of note, either negative or positive, from the history of your church?

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- 3. Where are places you would look to discover the local church’s history? (written minutes? oral stories and accounts?...interview old - timers? etc.)

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- 4. How might the history of the church impact health or success of the church today? (i.e. rough spots might still affect health today, great moments of success might be things to build on)

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a. What are aspects of your history you consider something to build on into the future?

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b. What aspects of your church history is something you need to address or deal with before you the church will find future health and success?

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5. How is your church and its history perceived in the community?

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of understanding its history, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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Visit our website...

[www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com](http://www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com)

where you will find...

- ❖
- ❖ Free audio files to download, offering insight and support related to the uniqueness of being a rural pastor.
- ❖ Follow the blog of a rural pastor as he shares life and ministry experiences
- ❖ Follow the blog of a denominational leader as he reflects on rural ministry.
- ❖ Download past RCPN event training resources to use with your church or local ministerial, or for personal support in your life and ministry.
- ❖ Find information on the next event planned for your area in October 2015
- ❖ Resources, Book Reviews and more!
- ❖ Let Us Know How We Can Pray for You!



DRAFT

## Practice Eight... A Thriving Rural Church

### NAVIGATES THROUGH CHANGE

The church remains resilient in navigating through the reality of change and conflict by weathering the challenges of its changing culture and demographics.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. How do you and your church view and process the need to change?

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3. What has been the most difficult change your church has had to face in its history... and Why?

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4. Why is change so difficult and even more difficult in rural churches than in others?

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5. What are some methods or processes of change that you have found helpful?

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6. Looking ahead, what might be the biggest change the rural church in general will need to face in the future? What about your specific church? (smaller numbers, lower resources, etc.?)

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of its ability to navigate through seasons of change, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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## Practice Nine... A Thriving Rural Church

### EXERCISES REONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP OF ITS GOD-GIVEN RESOURCES

The church maximizes the full potential of the God given resources entrusted to it.

Consider:

1. What does the bible say about this practice (provide passage/verse) and explain how it relates specifically to a rural church ministry context?

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2. How do we recognize the gifts God has given and entrust to our local church? What might we include in describing such gifts?

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3. How do we help people become good stewards of what is entrusted to them?

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4. What role can rural churches and their members play in caring for the resource of God's creation around them?

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5. How can we act as good and responsible stewards in our relationship with our community?

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For your rural church to be considered 'THRIVING' in terms of exercising responsible stewardship of its God given resources, what are the essential elements that need to be evident in the church, based on your biblical beliefs, local church history and denominational heritage?

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For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord,  
Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to  
give you a hope and a future. Then you will call on me  
and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You  
will seek me and find me when you seek me with all  
your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13



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