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

## RCPN Events Summary

May 1-3, 2012

From its inaugural events in Stettler and Lamont in November 2011, The Rural Church Pastors Network doubled its ministry reach across the province in the first week of May with four events in Debolt, Redwater, Viking and Three Hills. In total 44 rural pastors attended the events from 41 rural churches. Eight different denominations were represented from the pastors present. (Anglican, Apostolic, Baptist, Christian & Missionary Alliance, Evangelical Free, Independent, Mennonite Brethren, United)

The theme of the events focused on Church and Community Connection, and how a rural church can become fully engaged in the life of its community. Each event commenced with a time of worship and a devotional shared by the host pastor. A practical theology overview of Church and Community lead to round table discussion groups reflecting upon current community impact experienced by our rural churches.

A case study was worked through by pastors who formed 'coaching connectedness teams' in assisting a new pastor develop a strategy for connecting with his community in the first six months after arriving in his first rural pastoral responsibilities.

Best practices were shared related to each pastor's personal involvement in the community, along with a description of how each church is connected to community life.

A consideration of 'Next Steps' in applying principles shared and lessons learned throughout the day led to a season of prayer that brought each event to a conclusion.

For those attending for the first time, pastors received a Pastor to Pastor CD set entitled What I love about being a Pastor.... two hours of inspirational listening for the ride home!

Highlights of the events included.... Pastors praying over a fellow pastor who had to leave the event early to conduct a community funeral... Pastors from Pincher Creek and Fort Macleod driving up to four hours to get to the closest event... Lots of laughter, pastors worshipping together, meaningful prayer huddles.... Great food and fellowship in a relaxed atmosphere.

It is the goal of the Rural Church Pastors Network that pastors can reach events under two hours of driving. They plan to create two additional network hubs (Fort Macleod/North Edmonton Region west of Hwy 2) for their next events in November 2012.

To find out more information related to the Rural Church Pastors Network visit us on Facebook ([facebook.com/ruralchurchpastorsnetwork](https://facebook.com/ruralchurchpastorsnetwork)) & on the web at [ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com](http://ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com).

## **A Working Theology of Church & Community**

Tim Beadle, Church Coach ([tbeadle@transformcma.ca](mailto:tbeadle@transformcma.ca))

When he said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it,” (Matthew 16:18) what did Jesus mean when he used the word ‘church?’ When you keep these words in context, the early church hadn’t commenced, in fact Jesus had yet to go to Calvary. He spoke about his ‘church’ however, as a formidable force that would withstand the very gates of hell. When Jesus articulated this intention however, I wonder if the vision he cast describes our experience of what the church currently is? Remember, when he spoke of his ‘church,’ as of yet, it had no buildings, no programs and no clergy!

While many will debate the format ‘church’ might or should take, I am convinced Jesus’ view of his church was intimately bound to the context of its immediate community: the city, town or village in which His body of believers would call home, and ultimately share life together. As the Greek term for church, ecclesia, carries with it ideas of being gathered together or called out, the description begs the question, ‘gathered together or called out of what?’ Upon reflection the answer becomes obvious Jesus had in mind the focal point of ‘community.’ The church would be known as a ‘community within a community,’ but never end up being relationally or functionally divorced from the context of the community it found itself in. The church would be ‘in the world, but not of the world.’ (John 17:15-16)

In other words, local community is and must be the context in which the community of Christ exists. This premise is the starting point from which we need to develop a working theology of church and community connection.

The term community is understood both as a geographical place (i.e. DeBolt, Redwater, Viking & Three Hills) and to the experience of the shared common life between the residents in that place. Therefore people live in ‘a community’ and the common life shared with each other through managing resources, enduring hardships and experiencing life together is understood as living ‘in community’.

### **Reflect on these questions:**

- How would you personally describe the ‘church’ Jesus referred to in Matt 16?
- Over time, how has your understanding of ‘church’ changed or remained the same?
- To what extent was the church you grew up in connected to its surrounding community?
- How is your current church experience reflective of your community context?

## **How God Views Community**

The description of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and his letters to the seven 'city churches' in the book of Revelation gives evidence of God's heart in exposing the inseparable nature of the people of God and their community context. God's view of mankind has always been expressed in community because its central focus is found in relationship. That is why He created Adam and Eve. He desired relationship and community. Until Adam had another person to share life experience, God deemed his isolated condition as being 'not good.' That is why God told Abram He would make him a great nation. Abram's descendants were to be, to a watching world, a living illustration of community. This illustration is likewise expressed in the design of the church in the New Testament. The church was intended, in part, to demonstrate a new way of 'doing' community – of relating to God and each other – of being the community of God.

When God looks at your town, He views it holistically according to His redemptive purposes and as a reflection of His being and character. As all people are created in His image (Gen 1) and have a sense of eternity in their soul (Eccl 3), His unconditional love and desire is for all people to find true fulfillment in an intimate relationship with Him. This reveals the centrality of community experience in the mind and heart of God.

The ministry and message of Jesus also reflects the posture of His heart. While people were amazed at His teaching, they were moved by the fact He spent time going from town to town being with the very people whose lives He had come to redeem.

Jesus' disregard for the religious system and leaders of His day demonstrated a desire to reach people at their point of need through practical healing, and teaching that was rich in spiritual truth and hope. He taught the mysteries of His kingdom in parables that set the parameters for all that was and is yet to follow. Jesus' understanding of community was based on the values of the kingdom He taught. He provided His followers with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities in living with neighbours in community on a daily basis. The parable of the Good Samaritan addresses the question, 'who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10)

Until the day Christ returns, His heart is set on drawing people to Himself. He appoints His followers as ambassadors of His love, to live as salt and light in a world that lives in spiritual darkness; a world that does not understand that Jesus is the 'light of the world.' The Church represents His body, His presence, in community through which His love is modeled and shown to all. The example of service to others through a humble, servant-like practical expressions of love (John 13) becomes the mandate for Christ followers to live out.

Jesus didn't hide the essence of His Father's 'business' related to a life experience found in community. Shortly before His death, Jesus shared openly with His followers. Notice the continual relational terms expressed on various levels of 'community.'

As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one that this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you to go and bear much fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name. This is My command: Love each other. (John 15:9-17)

#### **Reflect on these questions:**

- Describe how God views your community.
- If God were to write a letter to your church and community what would He say to you?
- What things are occurring in your community right now that brings the greatest sense of delight and grief to the heart of God?
- How is God's 'business' doing in the life of your community today?

#### **How Community Views Us ... the Church**

Before we can become fully engaged in our community, it is imperative we gain an understanding of the cultural drift that has occurred throughout the past two or three generations. This drift has conditioned those in our community to develop a secular mindset in their understanding and view of God and His Church. I believe, to a certain extent, this mindset has found its way into the church as well.

Years ago I read a helpful description that has allowed me to become more like the 'men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.' (1 Chronicles 12:32) The article, *Understanding our Generation* was published in, *Living Proof* (cultivating a lifestyle of sharing your faith) and shares some of the following insights:

A hundred years ago believers and unbelievers in western culture agreed about most of the basic issues of life. They had a common world view. Almost everybody believed God existed, was a Person, had created the world, and had established certain moral standards as reflected in the Bible. About a century ago a cultural gap began to crack that consensus, and it's been widening ever since, leading to our current culture of secularization.

First, Darwin and other scientists challenged the idea that God created the world. Believers and unbelievers began to differ over the basic question of life: How Did I Get Here? Science became so popular that people started applying the 'scientific method' to just about everything, including God. Since He wouldn't stand still and be weighed and measured, He was relegated to being just another theory. Scientists declared that people were simply the product of chance and natural selection.

Philosophers reasoned that if man's origins were as the scientists had declared, then the 'purpose' for our existence was in doubt. We weren't here because a loving God, who had a plan, created us. So, philosophically, we were left with another question to grapple with: Why Am I Here?

As people questioned their origin and purpose, a third assumption widened the cultural gap even further. If the God of the Bible no longer gave us existence and purpose, then the Bible's moral standards should be ignored as well. The question, *How Then Should I Live?* was now up for grabs. For decades this issue has lingered, to the extent most people assume absolute truth (including moral truth) does not exist. Right and Wrong have been replaced by 'do your own thing.'

Secularization is a process by which religious ideas become less meaningful and religious institutions become more marginalized. When surveyed, the average person in your town views the Church as a private institution whose services would only be used in times of specific need. The two most common occasions to go 'to church' would be to observe a wedding or a funeral. As one person described these cultural functions; matching and dispatching!

**Reflect on these questions:**

- During your life what indicators come to mind that reflect the drift of culture and community away from God and his Church?
- How would the average person in your community describe the function of your church?
- To what extent has culture influenced the lives of those in your church today?

## How We View Community & Culture

While it is one thing to understand how the average person in community views God and the Church, it is another thing to understand the view we currently have of culture around us. We must ensure our view reflects the very heart of God. Paul taught the early believers to guard their view of those in community. He insisted, 'from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.' (2 Cor. 5:16)

We need to realize those outside faith in God are shaped to the core by their culture. Even in the church today we would have to admit that culture seems to be having more impact on the church than the church is having on culture. People, viewing how Christians live and the lifestyle choices they make, don't see much difference in lifestyle and therefore don't take the 'redemptive message of Christ' seriously - unless they find themselves in personal or family crisis, and then turn to others for help.

Since our values in Christ, and the values of those in our community who have no need for God, are so different, how can we truly relate to those in our community? Let's face it; water and oil don't mix. Is such association a noble thought, yet a hopeless reality? That's often our first sense when we find ourselves surrounded by people in our community who are unaware of the things that seem so central to our faith and life experience.

At this point it is helpful to stand back and look at this situation from the 10,000 foot level! It is there we find reason for hope. Besides being shaped by culture, all people have two things in common that make them susceptible to the gospel, whatever their cultural background: they are created in God's image and they are fallen.

1. Man is created in God's Image – God has made mankind unique, significant and like Himself in certain ways. God's design finds us able to relate to God as a person to a Person. We are self-conscious and able to make moral choices. There is something deep within us that keeps us struggling with the full understanding of ourselves until we acknowledge God. Inherent in God's design of mankind, is the built-in capacity for spiritual truth! The writer of Ecclesiastes describes the experience (3:11), 'He has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.'
2. Man is Fallen – When mankind fell however, life became futile and he encountered death. The knowledge of good and evil shifted mankind from God-centeredness to self-

centeredness (Gen 3:5/22) Self-centeredness gave birth to an unsettled nature because he had forsaken a God given moral compass. He assumed an ability to exercise control over his life, but in doing so became estranged from God's design of himself, from others, and from God. This disorientation found him unable to find an ultimate sense of peace, hope or contentment. To this very day it prods him to find a solution that seems somewhat elusive. To him life, in and of itself, doesn't make sense and leads to a sense of futility. In searching for an experience of wellbeing, he accumulates material possessions and exercises control and influence over others.

Futility makes life a pointless struggle (Eccl. 2:22-23) especially if the extent of life is just managing to exist - then it is back to dust. But the desperate pain of futility drives mankind to question: Why am I doing all this? Such questions find people starting to ask if there isn't more to life, which eventually might lead to questions about God (i.e. 'Is there a God who is actually there?' and 'What is the meaning of Life?') I believe that is why the book *The Purpose Driven Life* became a best seller in secular settings years ago as it dealt with the man's futility of living life without purpose.

These areas provide common ground between believer and unbeliever and give us hope that even stubborn hearts can be reached. We can face our neighbor's cultural barriers, and help them see that those barriers are actually restricting them from the 'full life experience' promised by Jesus (John 10:10).

If we, as the church are to serve as effective ambassadors for Christ, we must understand and care about the people in our community. Grieve for them; they have been trained since birth to believe falsehood and are surrounded by those who agree with them, but their beliefs are a dead end. It will take something drastic for them to turn their back on what everybody believes; something drastic like a love that reaches out and tries to understand!

**Reflect on these questions:**

- What would you describe as the prevailing values seen in the lives of those in your community?
- How do these values reflect the values of your church family?
- To what extent is there an 'us' and 'them' mentality related to those in your community outside of the community of faith?

## Helping the Church Find its Place in Community

For the local church to find a meaningful 'identity' and 'role' in its community, it is essential to:

1. Understand that God is ever present and relentlessly active in our community outside the walls of our church building. One of the dangers of not understanding this reality causes us to develop a kind of 'agnosticism' in our practice of ministry. We view people in our community as either believers or non-believers and, outside the sanctity of our sanctuaries, the presence or activity of God is nowhere to be found! A more correct theology would see God very active in the lives of all community members and invites us 'as His friends to become aware of His business.' (John 15:17) The business of drawing people to Himself in Christ through living lives of love. Rather than viewing our role as taking God to people, we might assume a posture of recognizing God's presence in our community and that He 'bids us join Him in it.
2. Avoid a two tiered understanding of our Faith. In such an approach our beliefs and practices focus on the ultimate issues of life (salvation, heaven, problem of evil) and ignore the intimate issues of life. (sickness, finding/ keeping a spouse) If our faith is to be holistic there needs to be a growing concern and relationship between both the ultimate and the intimate. We see God sending His Son to both preach the good news of salvation and address poverty and justice issues as well. (Luke 4:18-19) Therefore, both the proclamation of words and the demonstration of good works need to be integrated into our lifestyle as Christ followers in a meaningful and timely fashion.
3. Understand the Practical Application of the Gospel Message. Our understanding of the 'good news' has to be more than words on a page. It leads the inquirer to faith in the very person of Jesus. But an honest look at Jesus leads to an active demonstration of the very life that Jesus came to bring. A life of active love. The words of Jesus in restoring Peter in John 21 reveal the connection between expressing love for God and the need to act upon that love in caring for others practically. Oscar Hammerstein II once said,  
  
*A bell's not a bell 'til you ring it. A song's not a song 'til you sing it. Love in your heart wasn't put there to stay, love isn't love till you give it away!*
4. Practice Inclusive Discipleship as a way of life. Understand that the gospel message and the redemptive nature of the love that we are commanded to show all people changes societal systems and human hearts at the same time. We need to develop an all-

encompassing understanding of how the gospel works in the heart of man in the totality of his life experience. As we aim love at one area of life, that same love impact and cultivates the soil in the human heart for a spiritual encounter.

- Aiming love at issues such as community and family relationships (parenting/ divorce care/support and recovery groups), can be the very loving act by which God draws a person to himself. Recipients of a loving act eventually wonder 'why' the love was shown to them by a stranger.
  - Addressing social and economic injustice (hunger/homelessness/ unemployment) can have redemptive impacts on human relationships and again be used by God to model His love through the compassionate actions of those in the church community.
5. Know how to 'love people' and use words when necessary. William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army said, you can't preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to a starving beggar. First give him a bowl of soup! The early Salvation Army's motto of 'soup, soap, and salvation' set them apart from the churches of their day in taking seriously the holistic condition of those in their communities. They addressed physical and spiritual needs in a manner that built relationships of trust that in turn led to thousands hearing and submitting to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Some in the church feel their role is to proclaim Christ without any consideration of the condition of their community audience. Another extreme, which is just as futile, is to show acts of love but never get around to sharing the reason 'why' when people ask for the reason the good works are being shown. We must learn the balance between the two... in Relief and Recovery work there will be a high demonstration of WORKS without much proclamation of WORD. In that instance it is inappropriate. In the stages of DEVELOPMENT and SUSTAINABILITY the foundational truths of WORD become more important than the practical acts of WORKS. When fire swept through Slave Lake, Alberta in 2011, it was not the time for soap boxes to appear on street corners proclaiming escape from the fires of hell through salvation in Christ. It was a time for the churches to band together and become centers of refuge and distribution meeting practical needs for daily living. The WORKS of the churches in those weeks and months after the fire gifted the Church with the 'right' to be heard which was directly related to their initial loving response.

6. Learn how to live 'in community' with other churches in your community. It is sad there is tension and competition between local churches in any community. Rather than

standing united in cause and concern, many churches function in isolation from each other in addressing community need and often duplicate services already being provided because of personal preference rather than taking aim at a need no one else is addressing. Minor differences in theological belief or church practice can be accepted as part of being a diverse community of faith that seeks to present Christ in a coordinated manner to those in a community.

7. Understand your need to relinquish privacy for the sake of community. In our communities and in our culture, privacy and community serve in constant tension with each other. Clinging to a high level of privacy leads to a low commitment to function in community with others. To achieve a high sense of community, privacy must be reduced for the sake of a greater cause. In practice this means flexibility in schedules and commitments so that one can prioritize community needs over private preferences. For example, opening up one's home and practicing hospitality with neighbours, rather than shutting out the world while you are entertained by endless streams of technology, may need to be understood and worked out in everyday living. Understanding the isolating impact of technology should be addressed to avoid a breakdown in community association.

**Reflect on these questions:**

- Where do you see God active in your community outside of the walls of the church?
- To what extent does our faith reflect a 'two tiered' belief system?
- What is your understanding and practical application of the 'gospel message'?
- How does your church 'love' your community?
- How do the churches in your community live 'in community' with each other?
- How is the impact of technology affecting the culture of your church and community?
- Where do you see your church making the biggest impact in its community in the coming year?

**In Conclusion**

Before the church will ever reach her full glory and potential in Christ, connection with community must become central to the understanding of her identity. Jesus said the church is to function as salt and light in the world. Active association is implied so that as we bring seasoning and illumination of God's love to the world, people will see our good works and actually praise our Father above! (Matthew 5:13-16)

**NOTES:**

- Living Proof Evangelism (Cultivating a Lifestyle of sharing your Faith) Zondervan Publishing House (Grand Rapids, Michigan) 1990
- Some of the concepts in Helping the church Find its Place in Community were adapted from ideas shared in Holistic Discipleship: Integrating Community Development in the Discipleship Process (Jay Moon – EMQ January 2012)

## What Are Some of the Gifts That Churches Bring to Community Building?

Cam Harder, CiRCLe M (*Used with permission*)

### **1. Head Space**

I once asked Carl Dudley who has done hundreds of studies of how small churches and communities have turned around, what the most important factor was in their revitalization. He said “the belief that they can.”

Problem is, communities often get caught in trend worship—inevitability thinking. It’s an odd feature of human thought. Looking back we can see that history has been anything but linear. It’s full of loops and twists, unexpected disasters and wonderful surprises. Yet when we look forward we assume the future will simply be a straight line, an extension or intensification of the present. Communities that are prospering tend to think the good times will keep on rolling. Communities that are struggling tend to assume that their problems will get worse. That if services are being lost, more will be lost. That if a town is depopulating, it is moving inevitably toward death. The future looks like a black hole. Trend worship sucks the energy for change out of a community. People don’t try because they think there is no possibility of change—and so of course things don’t change, reinforcing their despair.

The Church can give a community head space, thinking room. It can help unlock the imprisoned imagination of towns and cities so they can fully explore life’s possibilities. We tell the story of a God who saw His Son fall into a nightmare of betrayal, capital charges and death and yet—to great surprise—raised that Son to indestructible life. The church claims that ancient hates and corrupt states, even the powers of death and hell have no ultimate authority because our common life is held by One who raises the dead. That surprising God is our future.

This is what it takes for a community to change: to believe that because God is on its side change is possible; to take stock of how God has been at work among them especially in their darkest hours; and to map its resources its resources fully and offer them to God. Such a community knows that it can choose a future different from its present no matter what the trend.

Essentially the church is called to stimulate in our communities the exercise of a rebellious imagination. To enable others to conceive of, and work toward, a new world.

A recent study of community resilience in Queensland, Australia found that communities that are healthy, able to bounce back from shocks of various kinds, have a number of common

characteristics. One of these is “a positive outlook”—hope in other words. People need to believe that change is possible if they are going to make any efforts towards it. Without hope, they don’t try—and things just get worse. But how does one hope in the presence of overwhelmingly powerful forces that seem to be crushing the life out of our community? That’s where another of the Queensland criteria comes into play. It turns out that resilient communities have a set of “beliefs” in something greater than themselves, and a sense of purpose or mission. They believe that their lives are not ultimately controlled by economic trends but by a God who cares about them and has a purpose for their existence.

## **2. Talking Space**

In a world dominated by great political and economic powers average folks often feel helpless to make a difference, especially rural folks, whose voices are already muted by the deafening shouts of urban needs and interests. They may feel that their voice is no more than a whisper in a hurricane. And even if they want to contribute they aren’t sure where to begin. The church offers a mid-sized space in-between the privacy of family talk and the vast fishbowl of national news media or political debate. It’s a space where people can test out their public “voice” with reasonable risk. They can learn to listen to those with different opinions. They can gain the confidence and build the partnerships that make it possible to take action for change locally, and even globally. And because we draw on people from all walks of life, we can bring folks together to talk who normally would never hear each other’s opinions—bartenders and judges, children and engineers, soccer coaches and artists, young and old, rich and poor.

In the beginning, the “Word” created human community; words continue to build or destroy it. Teaching our people how to talk well, providing good processes, healthy structured space for conversation is at the heart of what church and community are about.

## **3. Maze Walking**

Every winter when I was growing up, our local Mardi Gras featured an enormous straw-bale maze. I loved racing my brother through it. Growing older, however, I’ve lost my enthusiasm for mazes as I’ve come to realize that I’m going to spend my entire life in one. Life in North America is a series of bureaucratic mazes. Income tax, the health care system, banks and finances, the justice system and so on. There are overlapping, intersecting, and often contradictory rules, licenses, fees, punishments and procedures everywhere we turn. People with little education, people who are sick or frail, actually all of us, need someone to help them navigate those mazes. The Queensland study notes that healthy resilient communities are those which have developed strong social networks and support structures. People know that there will be someone to hold their hand through life’s difficult mazes.

Churches have a long and honorable history of this sort of accompaniment. We've helped people stranded in the basement of institutional bureaucracy to get heard at higher levels. We've helped people sort out complicated applications and legal forms, we've sat at hospital bedsides helping people make sense of their journey through illness. Of course we have to find out who needs accompaniment, and make sure that we are training people with the information and skills they need to be good map-readers for those bureaucratic mazes. For rural people who often have reduced access to basic social services this accompaniment is critical.

#### **4. The Rite Stuff**

We need help navigating not only through our social systems but through life crises and transitions as well. A couple of recent graduates from our Saskatoon Theological Union took adjoining parishes for their first calls just before two Mounted Police officers were shot and killed in that region. Families and friends of both the victims and the accused were members of their churches. These two pastors found themselves thrown into the local and national spotlight. They were expected to provide a way—a communal liturgy—for people to process the grief and horror of that experience. And that's what the pastors did. They created opportunities for folks to pray and lament. They modeled ways to be hospitable to media, to care for families. They helped their people channel the powerful but chaotic emotions triggered by the murders into a community-building experience. They mobilized hope and helped the region recover a view of itself as something other than a place that murders its police.

At Barack Obama's inauguration, an elderly pastor closed the ceremony with a blessing. It was one of the most powerful moments of the ceremony for me. He asked forgiveness for past failures, lifted up the aches and hopes of the millions gathered to watch, looked toward a community in which all are valued, and asked for the blessing of God. It made me feel like all of the events of the last two years had been gathered up, placed in the hands of God and now his country could move forward.

The church was born out of drama and liturgy and that is still its central activity. But our rituals are not meant to be a private thing. Public Churches take the rite stuff out to their communities. We help them celebrate harvests and holidays, lament deaths and disasters. We gather up the stories of a person or a place and share them at anniversaries and commemorations. We help communities to begin things well through baptisms, weddings, the blessing of new buildings and office-holders, and to end things well through farewells and closings. And we provide a process for healing and reconciliation from the conflict that a

community inevitably suffers.

## **5. A Home Base**

My experience of rural and inner city communities (where most of our Canadian churches are located) is that they live with constant change. Rural areas live with boom and bust economies dependent on the vagaries of commodity markets. Inner cities lose their infrastructure slowly, by attrition, or suddenly through urban “renewals” which tend to uproot people from their homes and shatter long established social structures. This is demoralizing to people who have worked for years to get a cultural or economic service going, only to see it dismantled when key leaders are forced to move out.

Churches however tend to persist through the vagaries of markets and government programs. Most rural communities have churches that are 75 to 150 years old. That’s staying power. We placed an intern into a church on Vancouver’s Hastings Street. Homeless folks wrapped in quilts and cardboard huddled on its steps. Inside others were sleeping on the pews. There was a mail service where the poor could pick up govt. cheques and correspond with friends. A laundry service and food hamper was there. And there was a congregation that worshiped with and welcomed the poor of Vancouver. They were a home for the homeless.

Whatever the needs of a community, churches can provide a reliable home base for community-building efforts because they have:

- a) a building.
- b) a pastor who knows how to train leaders
- c) a group of volunteers and the know-how to recruit, train and support them;
- d) a fund-raising structure and the know-how to raise funds.
- e) grass-roots memberships that cuts across social lines;
- f) a tradition of care for the weakest.

## **6. Saving Grace**

I said earlier that God’s grace allows communities to see their future as not simply a reaping of what has been sown in the past but as truly open. But grace also functions on an interpersonal and systemic level. Human communities tend to organize themselves formally according to the “Law”—through regulation of human behavior. But in the process they end up attaching value to people according to their ability to keep the Law. And that can have tragic consequences—it’s the foundation of racism, classism and most of the other “isms” that divide and destroy communities. The gospel tells us that our value is determined by God and reflected in God’s willingness to embrace us right through our fear and arrogance, even when we nailed God to

the cross. That grace is a tremendous gift to a community in a lot of practical ways.

#### **A few examples:**

- Grace makes education possible. A teacher friend of mine has a banner over her classroom door that says “this is a mistake-making place.” Every learner, every researcher knows that it takes many failures, trials and errors before they stumble on a new truth. To take those risks they have to know that their integrity as a human being is not at stake. If every mistake were a strike against us, if every error called into question our value and worth, we could never learn.
- Grace allows us to value the sick and suffering, knowing that their pain is not an indictment of their worth. And as we care for sufferers we develop skills and relationships that knit our community together. And in caring for sufferers we learn from them how to avoid at least some of life’s potholes.
- Grace allows politicians to listen and respond well to criticism without defensiveness, knowing that their personal worth is not on the line. Grace allows us to work with offenders instead of executing them or throwing them away as worthless.

And so on.

The Church has been given the gift of a great treasure—the gospel of God’s gracious love for us in Christ. Our communities need it. Let’s share it with them.

#### **Small Group Discussion:**

- What are some of the Church’s other “unique” gifts to the community-building mission of God?
- What kind of disciple-ship formation would we need to encourage our members to participate more intentionally in God’s community-building mission? What perspectives would we want to foster? What habits? What skills?
- What kinds of internal church life would foster these ways of being, habits and skills?

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*Centre for Rural Community Leadership and Ministry (CiRCLe M) is an interdenominational, non-profit, charitable organization ... equipping rural clergy and lay leaders to help revitalize rural Canadian communities. Visit their website <http://www.circle-m.ca/> where you’ll read, “At CiRCLe M we care a lot about rural churches and communities! And we think that they ought to be more closely connected. With the Lord’s help and guidance, our mission is to equip clergy and lay leaders in rural and remote places to help their churches be catalysts for the development of healthy Canadian communities.”*

## **Best Practices – What Has Worked For You**

Things we are doing personally in our communities -

1. Padre at Legion (3)
2. Community Dancing (Scottish Country)
3. School subbing or Community coaching (11)
4. YoYo demonstration at school (workshop)
5. Town Committee/Council Involvement (6)
6. Victim services unit (RCMP –legal system)
7. Deliver community newsletters 4x a year
8. Market Place Chaplain – local business involvement
9. Community Centre Board membership (3)
10. Work at election polling stations
11. Emergency medical/ambulance responder (2)
12. Youth criminal justice society – community service hours
13. Judging 4H and other community events
14. Teaching in public schools (2) (Biblical studies – grade 5)
15. Local food bank involvement
16. Music lessons/Choirs/Festivals (2)
17. Grad Service on behalf of local High School – held at church
18. Bi-vocational experience/lifestyle – connected to community through business
19. Community Water Quality Tester
20. Helping with community group fundraising (Girl Guides)

It was unanimous no one considered time volunteering in the community as a waste of time.

Things our churches are doing to connect with community -

1. Helping a sick child in town (handout)
2. Clothing Giveaway twice a year
3. Pick Up litter in Community (on Sunday afternoon – check with county!)
4. Pancake Breakfast for Firemen in Community (for no reason – 1/3 came!)
5. Allow community groups to use your building
6. Share hobby interests with those from the community - scrapbooking
7. Awana parents handout while kids are at awana
8. Preschool to meet community need (80% Non Churches families use it)
9. Supervise Community Service Hours for youth offenders
10. Provide scholarship for a high school grad \$500 for positive influence in town
11. Send church people out to what is already happening in town to volunteer (events)
12. Thank you BBQ for EMS workers
13. Lawnmower Tune Up Day (120) for donation to food bank – became a community connection event – town centre parking lot.
14. Built a house with volunteer labour from church and community

15. Assist at annual Rodeo Breakfast
16. Operation Christmas Cooking – senior ladies bake for people in community (120 dozen cookies) given to those who serve in town.
17. Volunteer in hospitals – sometimes more good and impact is done for the staff
18. Community 'Give Away' events – bless our community through giving things away
19. Assist at Town Fair
20. Provide live music for town events

Please Visit the RCPN website [www.ruralchurchpastornetwork.com](http://www.ruralchurchpastornetwork.com) and submit ideas and the story behind them to share with others!

## Community Connectedness

How can you find out the Community's conception of your Church?

1. Ask Members their understanding what people are saying
2. Ask other pastors in town who have observed the church over the years
3. Learn from community leaders about the entire town and then ask how your church fits into that picture
4. Walk down 'main street' and tell people you're new in town – tell me about the church
5. Get socially connected people to 'survey' their non-churched friends
6. Learn from people's response when they find out you are the church pastor
7. Talk to people/groups over coffee – local coffee shop
8. Learn from new believers about the church's reputation before they came to it
9. Graffiti on the side of the church!!
10. Relatives outside the church who can let you know feedback
11. Random conversations with people in town. (recognize certain aspect of your church)
12. Listening to the stories of the community from others and the role of your church and its members have had – gives you clues what people think or perceive.

How are your church members connected to community?

1. School activities (coaching, sub-teaching, general helping)
2. Sit on town planning committees
3. Social connections through sports or children's activities
4. Respond to felt community needs in time of need (groceries to single mom family – Christmas hampers)
5. Teaching ESL
6. Seniors Ministry in town
7. Serve Community Dinners
8. 'New to You' Thrift Store

What has been the greatest obstacle in connecting with your community?

1. We are all so busy in our own lives to make intentional connecting a priority.
2. Shift work or work travel (oil patch) in trying to build relationships with people
3. People don't feel comfortable connecting 'church conversation' with natural life conversation with those around us.

4. People feel 'judged' by the different type of lifestyles of those in the church (you don't come to the bar anymore)
5. People don't get the purpose for the church
6. Breakdown in people's relationships in the community leads to a community's inability to 'build community with each other'
7. Someone has tarnished
8. Lack of people resources to make it work
9. Self-perception can be an obstacle... in the church we perceive we are friendly – but we have to wait for people to come in and then we realize we aren't so friendly.
10. Location of church is outside of town therefore no direct contact with the town. Isolated without continual contact with the same people in town.
11. Our 'community' isn't so much in a town but in a region – therefore there is no focal point of community.
12. Church people have a misperception of pastor's connection with town people (lounge in curling rink!) They see you 'endorsing' behaviour by association.

## Summary of Case Study Findings

You are Jim's Community Connectedness Coaching Team. You will work with him for the first 6 months to guide him in his desire to make a difference in the community,

### 1. Who should he talk to?

- People in the church/leaders – expectations – secure 'buy in' so the church will support you as you get out of the church.
- Wife – she needs to be on board.... Will she get a job in town to get to know people? (strategic)
- The 45 year old will know more about what is happening in town than the senior citizen (contacts that retired people won't have)
- Mayor, principal, service clubs, other pastors in town, ag society.
- People in the church become the 'passport' into the community. Locate one or two seniors in the church to act as bridges in the community (take him for coffee)
- Whoever he can!! But it's better to do more listening than talking!
- Other pastors will know what's going on in town.

### 2. What kind of community activities should he engage in?

- Where he feels comfortable participating in light of his stage of personal and family life.
- Don't commit too much too early that later on he finds he can't sustain his pace.... Things will get busy and fill his calendar.
- Whatever his passion is.

### 3. Would it be good to volunteer or serve in some way?

- Yes to connect – but if you volunteer it is essential you follow through on your commitment – worse thing to happen is to say you will do something but then don't follow through.

### 4. As he connects with the community, what should be his agenda?

- Be Friends with people – will depend on the church reputation as a starting point and approach.
- Needs to find out about how 'small community' works – ask lots of questions – offer little advice!
- Making a positive difference in the community. Make an investment to show you are engaged.

- Just belong to the community
  - Agenda of 'taking time – long term view – slow steady pace.
  - Eventually to 'gain a voice' in the community – earn the right to be heard by being a good neighbour
  - Perceive you are planning to stay in the community – buy a house don't rent!!
  - Get a feel who the people are and what make them tick!
5. How much time should he reasonably spend in the church office? How much time with church people?
- Spend majority of time in church and then will diminish as time goes on as you get into the community.
  - Set church hours so at least people know when you can be reached at the church. Set Coffee Times to meet with people. It is contextual – don't sit in the church twiddling your thumbs, putting in time.
  - You have to be 'who you are'....create systems where people can connect with you (call forwarding)
  - You need to 'work' hard and ensure people know what you are up to.
6. How much effort should he put into connecting with the community himself and how much effort should he put into getting the church on board with him?
- *Talk this through with his board* so there is a common understanding and agreement related to community connectivity – don't let him stumble into making mistakes because of different expectations.
  - The board needs to 'think through' this, not responding with blind ignorance that the pastor just 'pastors' – clarity is needed. Elders are not trained in or challenged to consider this.
  - Remember who pays your salary! Before he starts running off and doing things check with church so that they don't become resentful.
  - He has to earn the right to be released to and into the community – can the church entrust him in releasing him into the community?
  - Keep verbalizing motives of why he is doing what he is doing in the community. Keep the congregation up to date with the 'what' and the 'why' related to community involvement.
  - Understand the practices of the previous pastor and the success of his approach.
7. How willing should he be to partner with individuals or groups who don't believe quite the same as he or his church does?
- Situational depending on need and urgency of it.

‘When I was hungry,  
you gave me something to eat,  
and when I was thirsty,  
you gave me something to drink.  
When I was a stranger  
you welcomed me,  
and when I was naked  
you gave me clothes to wear.  
When I was sick,  
you took care of me,  
and when I was in jail  
you visited me...  
Whenever you did it for  
any of my people,  
no matter how  
unimportant they seemed,  
you did it to me.’

~Jesus~

Matthew 25: 35-36/40



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