

Rural Church Planting Articles

Why Rural Church Planting?

Ministry in Small Towns: Worth a Lifetime Investment

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There's been a recent renewal of evangelical attention given to ministry in rural areas and small towns. The Vineyard's Small Town USA Initiative plants churches around the country, and Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center for Evangelism has launched the new Rural Matters Institute. Helpful books have been published, including Donnie Griggs's Small Town Jesus [read TGC's review], Aaron Morrow's Small Town Mission, and Brad Roth's God's Country, and articles about small-town ministry have appeared in WORLD magazine and on sites like The Gospel Coalition.

This renewed evangelical interest is part of a broader cultural curiosity about rural areas and small towns—the parts of the country largely responsible for the 2016 election of Donald Trump.

It's uncertain whether this current interest (both from the broader culture and from evangelicals) will continue. So long as it does, what might be done to nurture it into an enduring and effective movement toward the millions of Americans who live outside urban centers? There are numerous answers to that question; but one of the most important, I believe, is the development of a theological vision for ministry in small places.

Theological Vision

Tim Keller has taught a generation of urban pastors the meaning and importance of theological vision. It's "a middle space between doctrine and practice," in which we

reflect on theology and culture to discern how each shape ministry. It's "a vision for what you are going to do with your doctrine in a particular time and place." It's not a list of practical, specific how-to's; it's an approach to ministry that is translatable into different cultures and styles.

In developing a theological vision, Keller suggests we ask (among other questions), "Where are we located—city, suburb, town, rural area—and how does this affect our ministry?" Place matters a lot. A fruitful ministry will neither undercontextualize nor overcontextualize to its place. It will appreciate and adapt, but also challenge and confront.

Much of Keller's theological vision for ministry is naturally keyed toward big places—urban and cultural centers. And it has yielded immensely rich fruit; Redeemer City to City has planted hundreds of thriving churches in major world cities. And yet a fruitful, enduring movement toward small places will benefit from a theological vision for ministry specifically tailored to those places. What's needed is an understanding of how foundational doctrinal commitments will translate into small-place ministry values, which will then shape small-place ministry practice.

Avoiding Worldly Thinking

A major part of developing a theological vision for ministry to small places is coming to a better understanding of those places themselves. One good way to deepen our understanding is through an awareness of the often-flawed attitudes of our broader culture toward small places. Seeing clearly how our culture views small places falsely will help ensure our own instincts and actions don't simply follow the culture's lead, but are biblically and theologically informed.

In at least four ways, small places can be marginalized and misunderstood.

1. Small places are often forgotten.

In December 2012, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack spoke to a farm group in Washington, D.C. He warned of rural America's increasing irrelevance in a rapidly urbanizing nation:

Unless we respond and react, the capacity of rural America and its power and its reach will continue to decline. Rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country.

A 2013 USA Today article noted the difficulties that national lawmakers from rural areas face in passing legislation to aid their own communities, since they're so significantly outnumbered by politicians representing urban areas. As the state demographer of South Dakota noted, "Our rural people are not that significant. We don't have the votes. We don't have the voice." Vilsack himself has often spoken of rural America as invisible and forgotten.

No matter how you interpret President Trump's rise, it's clear that his winning rural places was tethered to the feeling of rural people that they were indeed invisible and forgotten. Their desire to be seen and remembered was so powerful that they were willing to give their votes to a fabulously wealthy urbanite who promised to give them a voice. But even if for the moment small places are being remembered, that may be the short-term exception that proves the long-term rule.

"To the extent Christians forget the small places, we fail them."

Evangelicals must beware of forgetting the small places. Such a shift away, in terms of ministry priorities, has been underway for some time. A 2016 Washington Post article observed:

As major ministries, conferences, book publishing, and church planting became centers of evangelical activity in urban and suburban areas in recent decades, evangelical leadership and priorities shifted away from small-town America.

We should all celebrate the gospel gains achieved through urban church-planting initiatives of the past 30 years. But it's clearly the case that, in the move toward urban centers, the small places have been eclipsed. The city has a "cool factor" the countryside simply cannot rival. A 2016 Daily Beast article quoted one observer as saying, "Coming to New York [City] becomes the coolest thing in the world for pastors: You're getting the very best to come."

The most well-known pastors, authors, movement leaders, and conference speakers almost invariably live and minister in urban or suburban places, and it can be very difficult for them to be in touch with the unique needs of rural places.

In an important 2016 Christianity Today article, "I Overlooked the Rural Poor—Then Trump Came Along," Tish Harrison Warren confessed her deafness to the "suffering and frustration of impoverished whites" in the "vast open reaches of the country," admitting, "For many, rural communities and small towns are faceless places we road-

trip through on our way to somewhere else.” Warren wondered whether urban evangelicals, in “our commitment to the city and snobbery about quality coffee, have forgotten the least of these outside the city limits?” With striking candor, she confessed a “conviction of sin” for her ignorance of—and indifference to—the small places.

To the extent that Christians forget the small places, we fail them. We cannot serve what we forget. A theological vision for ministry in small places, then, will begin simply by remembering them. We must read, study, observe, experience, participate. What are the contemporary realities of life on the farms, in the hamlets and villages and countryside? How do people in small places think about where they live? How do they think about themselves? Where must those views be endorsed or challenged? What are the unique dynamics of ministry in a small place?

A wealth of research, including sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s *Small-Town America*, and Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas’s *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, provides fresh insight. But of course, it’s not enough to read. At least some of us will be called to live and minister in the small places, and to develop a theological vision from that experience. These places are worthy of long attentiveness, care, and respect. No person is too skilled, godly, or educated to devote his or her entire life to serving a small, unknown place.

2. Small places are often despised.

Wuthnow bluntly identifies some of our broader culture’s stereotypes: “Small towns are places where village idiots reside, country bumpkins gather, and rednecks tell bigoted jokes.” His description is not a joke—you can find this kind of attitude even in Christian circles. As one urban ministry book reads, “In order to win people to Christ and plant churches, Paul didn’t go to a haystack in the countryside.”

“I understand the thinking that denigrates small places, because I shared it for the first

30 years of my life.”

Strangely, Christians grasp the importance of sending our best young people to small places on the foreign mission field, but often feel differently about those who go to small places in our own country, as though they’re squandering their talent and education. A *Time* magazine article noted the warning one professor gave to a gifted seminary student considering a call to rural ministry: “Don’t go. You’re too creative for that.” Some Christians participate in what Michael Kruger has called “the arrogance of

the urban” and Emmett Rensin has called the “smug style,” a mindset that disdains or caricatures small places as backward and unimportant.

It’s a view with a long pedigree (John 1:46).

I understand the thinking that denigrates small places, because I shared it for the first 30 years of my life. Though I grew up in a small town, I somehow internalized the notion (it was never explicitly expressed to me) that the farther I could get from my hometown, the greater a success I would be. Moving to a faraway city became my idea of making it big. And indeed, I made significant strides toward my goal, living and studying in distant, wealthy suburban areas and receiving an advanced degree from an overseas university. Then God called me to live and minister in a small town. In the decade since, I’ve come to more clearly see—and repent of—my sinful attitude.

We cannot serve what we despise. Developing a theological vision for rural and small-town ministry will include recovering a respect for these places and their people—an affirmation of Francis Schaeffer’s claim that there are no little people and no little places

The Bible will help us here. It’s high time for a fresh assessment of the biblical view of small places. Eckhard Schnabel’s two-volume work *Early Christian Mission* (2004) and his subsequent *Paul the Missionary* (2008) provide evidence of both urban and rural elements in early Christian mission (including the small-town and rural focus of Jesus himself). More recently, Thomas Robinson’s major scholarly work *Who Were the First Christians?: Dismantling the Urban Thesis* (2017) shows the composition of early Christianity was likely much more rural than has been recognized. Christianity is rooted in a respect for the small, not a denigration of it. Jesus and his apostles valued and served those who were marginal, uninfluential, and despised by others. Indeed, that is who they were (1 Cor. 1:26–30).

3. Small places are often idealized.

Rural demographer Calvin Beale once wrote, “The countryside was a time machine in which urbanites could see the living past, and feel nostalgic or superior, as the sight inclined them.” Indeed, Wuthnow notes that large metropolitan residents often have perceptions of small places that fall into one of two categories: despising them or idealizing them. They think, Wouldn’t it be nice to live like people used to when nobody locked their doors, the air was fresh, morals were pure, and life was uncomplicated? Such views have been around for a long time. In 1802, a Maine woman named Eliza

Southgate wrote to a friend, “Our novelists have worn the pleasures of rural life threadbare.”

Evangelicals have sometimes participated in this idealization. Some time ago, I read an urban church-planting book that referred to the “peaceful environment of small-town America,” naively obscuring the complex realities and deep brokenness of many small places. Another resource spoke of idyllic towns where one could more easily escape the city’s sinfulness and complexities. We must do better. We will not fruitfully serve what we idealize. If we don’t see the problems, we won’t address them.

A theological vision for ministry to small places will recognize the deep sinfulness, brokenness, and complexity of people everywhere, in places big and small. Our broader culture is increasingly aware of the rural problems. In a 2016 Harvard Business Review article, Joan Williams wrote:

In the huge red plains between the thin blue coasts, shockingly high numbers of working-class men are unemployed or on disability, fueling a wave of despair deaths in the form of opioid epidemic.

Hearteningly, some Christians are taking notice. TGC recently published a major piece on the opioid crisis and the substantially rural aspect of that crisis. To quote Eliza Southgate again, writing in 1802: “Let us judge for ourselves— we all have seen what the pleasures of rural life are, and whatever poets may have ascribed to it, we must know there is as much depravity and consequently as much discontent in the inhabitants of a country village as in the most populous city.”

4. Small places are often used.

Most small places are tiny in population and influence. People are scattered over the countryside, which makes it more difficult to rally them and advocate for political causes (which is why Trump’s achievement was so unexpected and impressive). Consequently, small places are more likely to be taken advantage of by larger, more powerful metropolitan areas than vice versa, even though the agricultural heartland continues to feed our country.

“Serial short-term stays are exactly what small places do not need.”

There’s another way in which small places are disadvantaged in relationship to metropolitan areas: Many of the young people who are loved, cared for, invested in,

and educated in small places will eventually move to universities and cities, never to return. This one-way population flow has sparked urban renaissances in big cities, while creating what Carr and Kefalas refer to as an “unstoppable downward cycle” in many small towns. Young people leave, school enrollments decline, resources diminish, poverty and social isolation increases —and therefore, unsurprisingly, young people don’t want to come back. Carr and Kefalas note that when talented kids move away, “the investment the community has made in them becomes a boon for someplace else.”

We must beware lest we, in our own way, participate in the “using” of small places. Small-town ministry has long suffered from what might be called “youth ministry syndrome.” Seminary graduates minister in small places to prepare for what they really want to do: be a lead pastor in an urban or suburban church. They’re encouraged in this by those who advise them to get experience in a small place before moving to a bigger one. A friend told me he remembers someone referring to their small church as a “starter church.”

And Wendell Berry offers- the heartbreaking testimony that in 50 years in his rural community, “many student ministers have been ‘called’ to serve in its churches, but not one has ever been ‘called’ to stay.” Instead, small, rural communities have paid for (and sometimes endured) the training of ministers who invariably go off to big cities. One of the two small churches in my hometown had a long succession of seminary students pass through, staying put until they graduated and a bigger church in a bigger place called them away.

While many reasons for leaving are certainly understandable, serial short-term stays are exactly what small places do not need. In interviewing small-town residents, Wuthnow found that, for them, the “most compelling aspect” of their community was that “things stay the same.” People in small places tend to place great value on longevity, trustworthiness, and depth of relationship—precisely what our system of “graduating” promising pastors to big places does not give them.

Keller rightly notes that in large churches, pastors earn the right to counsel by preaching well, while in small churches they earn the right to preach by counseling well. Counseling requires time, knowledge, and relationship. It can be difficult to live in small places, and God will call some faithful Christians to move from small to big places for a variety of excellent reasons (it’s certainly not an automatic mark of selfishness to leave). But he will also call some to stay long-term because of love.

“No person is too skilled, godly, or educated to devote his or her entire life to serving a small, unknown place.”

To the extent that we participate in our culture’s using of small places, we will fail those places. We cannot serve what we’re merely using. A theological vision for ministry to small places will see them not as means to a greater end, not as stepping stones to a more desirable station, but as places we want to be for the glory of God.

Worth a Lifetime Investment

Being aware of worldly ways of thinking about small places will spark a theological vision for reaching them. Small places are worse than we believe when we idealize them—they’re fractured, needy, and hurting. But small places are simultaneously better than we realize when we despise them. They’re worthy of our full attention and devoted service, if for no other reason than that millions of eternal souls still live in them.

To the extent that God’s people embrace small places through committed, long-term service, may we skillfully translate our doctrine into ministry values that will deepen our gospel influence in these places that God himself loves.

SO MUCH FOR THE CITY: REDISCOVERING A VISION FOR SMALL-TOWN CHURCH PLANTING

By Robin Ham

One of the albums that made up the soundtrack to my late-teens was the debut record from The Thrills, a Dublin-based rock band who peaked around 2004. Titled *So Much for the City*, it was a homage to small-town America with more than just a hint of The Beach Boys thrown in. One moment they were pining for the bright lights of the city, the next they were finding it had lost its charm and were longing for home.

Dreaming of the City?

There’s no doubt about it: the emergence of church-planting in the last couple of decades in the Western Church has been really exciting. **As an undergrad thinking about ministry back in the ‘noughties’, it felt like planting was the epitome of ministry aspiration.** Voices from across the pond were undoubtedly a significant part of this: Mark Driscoll was telling us (with rather colourful language) about how Mars Hill

had grown out of his living room into a multi-campus church in Seattle. People were starting to notice how years of head-down ministry and thinking from Tim Keller on planting in secular places was bearing fruit. Here in the UK, the London set had their wheels in motion: St Helen's, HTB and Co-Mission have been courageously relentless in pursuing new planting opportunities, be they 'grafts' into existing (but perhaps struggling) churches or fresh start-ups. New student-focused churches were being initiated in university cities and towns across the nation, especially where it was felt there was a lack of existing gospel ministry.

But in pretty much all of this – or certainly in the way much of this was portrayed, there was a common planting loci: the city.

Hoping to plant a church? **Chances are you were dreaming of the city.**

And despite the growth and maturity of countless church plant movements and initiatives, some would argue that the 'citification' of church-planting hasn't changed much since then.

Got Nothing Against a Big Town...

Donnie Griggs is out to change that. In his little primer for small-town planting, aptly titled *Small Town Jesus*, he takes his cue from John Mellencamp's 1985 hit, 'Small Town':

Got nothing against a big town / But my bed is in a small town / Oh, and that's good enough for me...

Cities are great. We need the gospel planted in our cities.

But perhaps too often we're focused on the city, and no one else gets a look in.

Just think about the language we use: we talk about redeeming our cities and renewing our cities. We say cities are strategic because, after all, the world comes to our cities. And cities (and large towns) are where the students go, so that's where we need to plant. And anyway, doesn't the Bible's story end with a city?

Small towns, on the other hand?

Well, they somehow don't grab the imagination in quite the same way.

The Assumption of the Trickle-Down Gospel

And perhaps sometimes going hand-in-hand with this emphasis on the city has been the assumption that if you reach the cities, you're reaching the nation. Griggs refers to this belief as borrowing from 'Trickle Down Economic Theory'.

We believe the gospel will trickle down from the city to the small towns and rural villages. But does the gospel really float down-stream quite so efficiently? Are cities quite so porous, in that sense? Speaking about the UK context, Tim Chester has offered a similar warning:

“It’s often said that we should focus our attention on cities because cities are centres of influence. The idea is that the gospel will then spread out to surrounding rural areas. And there maybe something in that.

But we need to realise that the movement of the gospel to rural areas will not happen by accident. We need to be intentional. We need to plant churches in rural areas. In much of the area where I live people would have to drive at least half an hour to an evangelical church. Unbelievers are not going to do that! We need to take the gospel to them.

And that means scattering areas like the Peak District and North Yorkshire with gospel communities. Our vision has got to be churches planted in market towns, supporting gospel communities in village after village.”

In Griggs’ analysis he counts small towns as those under 25,000. According to the 2011 census, there were 7,339 towns or cities in England, and only 411 of them had more than 25,000 inhabitants. That means to focus exclusively on cities (and large towns) and to assume that the gospel will float downstream will mean over 6,928 small towns are likely to fall off our radar.

To be fair, much is being done to de-mystify the aura of church-planting as being all about the city. There’s the pastiche of planters wearing skinny jeans, using on trend fonts and doing their sermon prep over flat whites in coffee bars, and inevitably it’s an image that is tied-up with city living.

Of course, many pastor/planters in cities would be quick to point out that the reality on the ground is nothing like that. Cities bring with them unique problems and unique and ugly under-bellies. At the moment I’m going to Manchester once a month to meet with other planters and each time I come out of the station I’m reminded me of the sheer scale and breadth of gospel need in cities.

But there does seem to be this latent assumption that church-planting is something you do in the city. The obvious problem with this is that people are less likely to consider moving and planting in the small towns. That’s simply not where planting happens. After all, how can you plant where there’s no constant influx of twenty-somethings to bring on board, or where there’s no Starbucks in sight? But there’s another inherent danger too.

The Danger of ‘Copy & Paste’ City-Planting into Small Towns

The city focus is also problematic for those of us actually in the small towns, because we start to assume that the way to do ministry and plant churches is by modelling ourselves on planting in the city. If that’s all I can see in the projected culture of planting, then I’m going to assume my job is just to reproduce it in the small town. **To use Griggs’ phrase, it’s copy and paste ministry.** And that’s going to leave me disheartened and envious when I find that my small town isn’t particularly taking a fancy to the version of flat-packed city church I’m attempting to construct.

Here Griggs uses the example of Tim Keller. All around the world he sees people trying to imitate the ministry of Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City. But the ministry at RPC has been shaped by the culture of the context. Keller has “done the hard work of serving, learning, and earning the right to be heard within his cultural context.” The fruit of his contextualization is the particular ministry & mission RPC. But what we mistakenly do is imitate the fruit, copying and pasting that shape of mission & ministry into our own contexts. **We forget that what we should be imitating is the process of contextualization, rather than the particular contextual NYC fruit.** Of course, we probably follow that route because it avoids the hard work of understanding our context too.

Contextualization can be a bit of a swear word, and, to be sure, there’s a danger of over-complicating it. But equally we don’t need to make it into a ‘baddie’ that is out to get the gospel. Griggs puts it simply when he says:

“Culture is the context that we will plant the seed of the gospel into.”

Know Your Soil

The simple point with small towns is that their culture is a different context to that of the city. (Of course, we equally shouldn’t assume that ‘city culture’ is one clear-cut homogeneous package either.) But the point is that small towns will be different again. Griggs asks:

Do you know what makes your small town tick. What is it that everyone loves? What do people rally around? What do they celebrate? What do they mourn? What fuels your economy?

Interestingly, in the same year (2016) that Griggs’ brought out Small Town Jesus, a pastor called Aaron Morrow authored a book called Small Town Mission. Morrow is located in Iowa, some 1,100 miles from Griggs’ base in coastal North Carolina, but as we might say in England, it seems that books on small town ministry are a bit like buses, right?! Morrow’s book has some really useful practical suggestions and is formatted as more of a workbook for a small group or group of friends to work through.

Of course, there’s no substitute for just being present in a place – the nuts and bolts of observing life and culture and talking with people and hearing their stories, as well as their hopes and dreams. **But as I read Griggs and Morrow I find they help me make sense of the cultural and religious realities I see around me – as well as providing lots of wisdom for serving the work of the gospel in such places.** At 70,000 people, Barrow wouldn’t be filed under Griggs’ < 25k definition of a small-town, but it’s geographical isolation and wider rural Cumbrian context mean that lots of his reflections apply.

RURAL CHURCH, SMALL TOWN, CHURCH PLANTING

Rural Matters: Placing Rural Church Planting Back on the Map

Small town pastors are doing big things for God's Kingdom. | WES HOLLAND

I recently introduced my daughter to the 2006 Pixar movie *Cars*. Sorry, if I'm ruining the movie for anyone, but it has been out since 2006, so tough. The movie follows a race car named Lightning McQueen who ends up stranded in a small town off Route 66 called Radiator Springs. It wasn't until I was watching the movie, for what seemed like the thousandth time, that I noticed the great work Pixar put into showing how society sees these towns and how special these rural towns once were and can still be today.

The town of Radiator Springs represents the state of many rural towns today - on the verge of being a forgotten ghost town. Once a booming stop along a famous highway that connected the east to the west, now very little traffic drives through these towns due to new interstates that bypass the town or big industries moving out to larger, more central, cities.

The main character in the movie, while stuck in the small town performing community service, spends half the movie complaining about his talents being wasted working in the town, while neglecting to see the importance of doing anything to transform or restore the small, rural community.

I believe this has been the attitude of many pursuing vocational ministry. We treat rural areas like a place to get gas as we drive through, rather than a place to call home. Growing up outside Tulsa, Oklahoma, I spent most of my life church planting in smaller rural communities with my family. I can remember driving the old Route 66 highway between Tulsa and Oklahoma City, passing through run-down forgotten downtowns where people use to gather, seeing collapsing houses that once brought life into the community, and stopping at the few remaining gas stations that have survived generations of change.

While spending time living and ministering in these communities, I had the privilege of seeing how new churches, passionate about demonstrating and proclaiming the gospel, could breathe life back into a community and restore the hearts of those calling rural towns home.

Do Rural Communities Really Need Another Church?

With the recent resurgence focused on rural communities, there is no better time to raise awareness for the need for life-giving churches in those areas. The Wall Street

Journal just published an excellent article asking the question, "[Is Rural America the New Inner City?](#)"

This has added to the discussion about the struggles facing rural communities. But is that a good reason to plant churches? Why not just focus on revitalizing the churches already established in the community? The truth is, we need both and the Rural Matters Institute will be involved in both.

The reality is that new churches see more baptisms and faster growth than established churches. So, while we will be providing support and research for pastors and leaders working toward revitalization, our vision at the **Rural Matters Institute** is also to bring hope, dignity, and affirmation to the ministry of the rural church planter.

The **Rural Matters Institute** was launched as a resource network and initiative that would bring support to rural pastors, while helping spearhead the need to plant life-giving, Spirit-filled churches. Rural Matters will be a think tank focused on gathering leaders from across denominations and networks to collaborate, research, and build resources developed specifically to help put rural back on the map.

So, what will it take?

That's the question. In my short time as the administrator of the **Rural Matters Institute**, I've had the privilege of connecting with many individuals who have chosen to follow God's call to rural America to plant churches and breathe new life into small towns. At our first annual **Rural Matters Conference**, September 19-20 in Sachse, Texas, you will get to hear stories from church planters and pastors utilizing multisite to reach rural communities. Here's one take away from my conversations with these pastors.

A Change of Perspective

It's easy to forget the beauty of these towns and the people that call them home. Toward the end of the movie, after spending time building relationships with people in the town, Lightning McQueen takes a ride to the top of a ridge where he has a clear picture of the valley below, including Radiator Springs. Lightning is stunned by the beauty of it all and for the first time his perspective changes. He's broken through the social stigma that rural towns are unimportant and forgotten.

Changing one's perspective takes time and patience. We need to change the way in which we see rural towns. This takes spending time in the community while praying for an open heart and a clear mind from any predetermined views we might carry. We need to stop seeing small church, small town as a stepping stone but instead as a solid rock to build the house of the Lord (Matthew 7:24-27).

We must become an expert of the culture, which takes endurance and patience. We've all heard the statement, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," a phrase originated by Peter Drucker and made famous by Mark Fields. Each leader I talk with could be an expert on building a strong strategy. But they all started with talking about culture. They invested in the community, looked for places people

spent time, and learned the history and customs of their town. They fell in love with the rural community, ultimately earning them a seat at the table. When I went into church planting, the scripture God continually placed in my head was Jeremiah 29:4-9. Here, God challenges the people to settle in the land where God placed them. Build homes and have families. It was not their dream location, but God called them to be faithful. It was a strong reminder to trust in the Lord, to not rush, but wait on His movement. To make peace where we are called and be open to the truth that we might be a small town pastor doing big things for God's kingdom.

Rural Church Planter (Traits)

The Type Of Leaders A Small Town Church Needs

Donnie Griggs

A pastor or church planter that wants to make a long lasting impact on their community will need a strategy to develop good leaders. Here are some of the qualifications I find vital when looking for new leaders in a small town church.

Leaders Who Are Reliable

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” 2 Timothy 2:1-2 ESV

You can’t “entrust” things to people without knowing you can trust them! And this is not something you can learn in an interview. Finding out if someone is reliable takes time. You have to invest in them and watch to see what they do with what they’ve been given. Jesus said that those who are given more are those who have been “found faithful.” Don’t skip this just because you really want them or need them. These are people, God’s people, who are being led, and he wants reliable people leading them. As much as possible, bring through leaders from the “inside,” rather than outsourcing them all. We will look more at a leadership development strategy for small town churches in a later post.

Leaders Who Love Your Small Town

If you bring leaders in from the outside without vetting them for your context, you are playing a dangerous game. A love for your small town is imperative for everyone who is a leader on your team. Snarky comments and cynicism that come from someone who feels “stuck” in your small town will cause long lasting damage to the ministry you are trying to build. If they don’t love your small town, don’t give them a platform with which to trumpet their poor attitude.

Leaders Who Love Your Church

Leaders who don’t share your vision for the church you are leading are poison. However, many pastors and church planters I meet don’t have a clearly defined philosophy of ministry or a process of making sure potential leaders agree with it. If you are only looking for doctrinal alignment, things will get ugly fast. There are plenty of great people that agree with me on doctrine, but would be a horrible leader in the church, because we don’t share the same philosophy of ministry. Maybe the first step for you is figuring out what are your ministry distinctives. Maybe you have those already and now need to work potential leaders through them. Whatever you do, don’t settle for

someone who only aligns with you theologically. You need people who get what you're trying to build and HOW you're trying to build it.

Leaders Who Are Teachable

One of the biggest challenges I've faced as a church planter and pastor in a small town is trying to work with people who have had previous ministry experience. It occurred to me that in previous history, these people would have been vital in church plants. Why are they so often difficult now? I think it is because of our relatively new fixation on the gospel and mission. Leaders from previous churches in a small town, more than likely, have never experienced a centrality on those two key elements of modern church planting. If they are unwilling to be taught how to lead, preach and disciple with things like mission or gospel at the forefront of their methods, they will prove unhelpful in the end. Take heart though, more often than not, I am seeing that you can teach "old dogs new tricks."

Leaders Who Are Willing To Get Their Hands Dirty

Many churches in small towns feel like their choices of new leaders are so limited that they cater to letting people do "what they feel led" to do which is often a spiritualized way of saying "what they want to do." What you eventually learn is that a leader who only wants to do what they want to do is selfish and should be avoided until they grow up. If we learn anything from watching Jesus washing his disciples' feet, we see that in gospel ministry, things are not "beneath" us. Look for leaders who are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. If they show up with a list of preferences and a prenuptial agreement, shut it down!

Leaders Who Don't See This As A Stepping Stone

Small towns are often not seen as destinations, but the people who live there deserve to be led by people who've taken them seriously. If a leader is only interested in leading at a church in a small town so they can advance to something bigger and better down the road, people will be able to tell. Jim Elliot once said, "Wherever you're at, be all there." There's something to be said for someone who can put their hands on the plow & work the field that God has given them. What you don't want to deal with is a leader who is obsessed with the greener grass somewhere else.

Leaders Who Want To Make A Difference...Not Just A Title Or A Paycheck

Remember that Paul tells Timothy that you need to look for leaders, "...who will be able to teach others also..." Simply put, don't bring through leaders who can't lead. Just because someone has a degree from a bible college doesn't mean they can lead people. Just because someone was successful in business doesn't mean they will be successful in leading others in a church. However, too many churches I see hire people based on those stipulations. What you may be getting is someone who wants a title or a paycheck, but doesn't want to lay their lives down to make a difference in the people

coming to your church. Someone taught me once that we should “recognize, raise up and release” people into ministry from within our church as much as possible. This has saved us a world of hurt at One Harbor. Look for people who are making a difference without a title or a paycheck. The chances are that leadership would only lead to more of the same.

Leaders Who Are Better Than You...At Something

This is counterintuitive. Leaders are people and people naturally want to surround themselves with people who they can dominate. We like to feel like we are on top, but good leaders learn to reject this natural way of thinking and look for people much better than them. Think of it like a baseball team. If a baseball team had 25 world-class catchers, how many games would they win? Zero. Because you don't need a team full of great catchers, you need a great team with two great catchers. In the same way, build a team that is better than you at things you are not great at. The goal is to “win” as many unsaved people as possible to Jesus, not feel like a god when you walk in the office.

Planting in a Small Town

Noel Jesse Heikkinen

Noel (@noeljesse) pastors at Riverview Church, a rapidly-growing, multi-site church in the Lansing, Michigan area where he lives with his wife Grace and their four children (Emma, Jesse, Ethan, and Cole). He also serves as Chairman of the Board for Reliant Mission and (more importantly) the local baseball league. Noel is the US Midwest Network Director.

I grew up in the Mint City. That may mean nothing to you, but for my small hometown of St. Johns, Michigan, it was a point of pride. At the right time of year, if you drove down the gravel roads with your windows down, you could smell the mint wafting in from the fields. Our town hosted an event called the Mint Festival each summer, complete with a mint-themed parade, gallons upon gallons of Mint Chocolate Chip ice cream, and (of course) the inauguration of the Mint Queen.

As much as you may enjoy your minty fresh toothpaste or favorite spearmint gum, you probably don't care one bit about my back-woods, rural, hometown and their annual festival. But there are lots of people who do. And one of them is Jesus.

Remember the Great Commission?

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

There's a cool little word buried in Jesus' marching orders: "nations." In Greek, that word is "ethnos," and this little word means (according to The Complete Word Study Dictionary), "a multitude, people, race, belonging and living together."

In the Mint City, there is a quirky little "nation" of people who belong and live together. They have chosen to live in a small town for a reason. They like their mint, their traditions, and their pace of life. They have family values and cultural idols, aspirations and historical patterns of sin. And just like everyone else who has ever taken a breath of the same air on our planet, they need Jesus.

I was struck by a study a few years ago that revealed that 35% of the population of Michigan lives in a county that has no urban context at all. That's 3.5 million people! Even more shocking is that a person living in a small town in Michigan is less likely to attend church than someone living in a city center or suburb. We need courageous church planters who are willing to go to these unreached small towns in the name of Jesus. It could be said that the need is greater in small towns than almost anywhere else in our state. It also means we need courageous church planters who are willing to go to these unreached places in the name of Jesus.

I recently sat down with a rural church planter and asked him to describe the ideal candidate to launch a new church in a small town. Some of this stuff may sound like it's chock full of generalities, but to anyone who has grown up in an area like this, it largely rings true.

A small town planter needs to have stickability.

Pastoring in a rural area is a long process, akin to watching mint grow. It requires settling down in a place where most of the people either know everyone or know of everyone. It takes a while to be accepted as "one of us." The number one trait of a successful small town planter is the mental conviction: "I am staying."

A small town planter needs to love people who don't care if he loves them.

Lots of people in small towns aren't looking for more friends. Part of the reason they live where they live is the small number of people. They don't need to be your friend and a good church planter needs to love them anyway.

A small town planter needs to be willing to talk with people who don't care if you talk with them.

It's not that small town folks don't want to talk with you, it's just that they don't care if they do or if they don't. They can live without the conversation so you need to take your time getting to know them and not rush things.

A small town planter needs to be OK working with people who aren't "leaders."

I am not saying there aren't leaders in small towns, there are lots of them, but they are a different breed. Most people in small communities aren't looking to make a big splash in the world—those folks take off for the urban areas. They aren't looking for the next big idea or some innovation that will rock their worlds. They very well may enjoy a creative approach to ministry or a big leadership challenge, but they aren't expecting it and may be a bit suspicious of it at first. You may also want to avoid the artsy church name, too, while you are at it.

Finally, a small town planter needs to be OK with measuring success by Biblical community instead of the number of people coming around.

Small town planter: measure success by Biblical community instead of the number of people coming around. The bottom line is, if people are hearing the Gospel of Jesus preached and they are applying it in community, it's a win. That may never mean (and probably won't mean) a big church. It means getting your hands dirty and loving a few people for a long time.

So here's the big question: does this sound like you?

If the answer is "yes," or even "maybe," head to a small town near you this summer and sample the mint...or the barbecue...or the dumplings. You may find a nice place to spend the rest of your days telling a few people about Jesus.

Rural Church Planting Culture

Get Out Of The Coffee Shop And Into The Duck Blind

– Donnie Griggs

I spent the first few years of our church plant in my small town trying to meet with people the same way I did when I was on staff at a church in urban/suburban Southern California. I scheduled meetings at coffee shops and at the church office. I met with people weekly for months and always left the meetings feeling like I wasn't making any headway. The meetings felt lifeless and forced. It was exhausting for everyone present but I didn't know another way.

Then someone invited me to go fishing. It felt wrong to fish when I was supposed to be "working" at the church. But I went with it. I had been wanting to really talk about the gospel with the guy who invited me for some time and the coffees weren't cutting it. We got in the boat and as soon as we got on the water he started asking deep questions about Jesus and church. I was blown away.

A little while later, another guy in our town who was a good friend asked me to go hunting. I didn't hunt and I was busy with a "million" things going on in our church plant, but I really cared about this guy and, again, the coffees had got us nowhere. Before the sun had even come up, he began asking deep questions about Jesus. This was after six months of meeting every week and seemingly getting nowhere.

I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I was starting to catch on. Maybe people in my small town didn't want to meet for coffee like people in Southern California seemingly had. Maybe people in my small town who were checking out Christianity didn't want to come hang out in a church office. Maybe, if I was going to meet with them and have significant discussions about how great Jesus is, I would have to break outside of my normal meeting modus operandi.

What I was learning was that I needed to be the one who felt uncomfortable in the meeting. Here's what I mean: We were going to end up discussing things that I really understood and already believed. This was already a lot for someone considering being a Christian to take in. Additionally, I was a pastor and a lot of folks were instantly intimidated by meeting with me. To this day when I say, "Would you like to hang out" it is translated, "You're in trouble. Let's talk about it." Meeting over coffee was not something that people in my town really did. They drink coffee, but it's usually from a Dunkin' Donuts drive-thru. Finally, meeting at a church was my "home court," but it was another really intimidating place for people new to Christianity.

If one of us was going to be uncomfortable about where we met, it should be me. Therefore, I needed to find where they would be most comfortable to talk about deep issues. Where would they naturally want to open up? Where would it feel like "home court" for them?

I began to realize that this is actually what Jesus did. He didn't invite Peter, the local fisherman, to come to the synagogue for a meeting. He got in his boat and went fishing. Now, Jesus didn't take everyone fishing because Jesus was obsessed with fishing and wanted to use this discipleship as an excuse for his favorite hobby. No, Jesus fished with Peter because that was Peter's comfort zone. Jesus invited Peter into gospel ministry by saying that he would be made into a "fisher of men," something Peter would have instantly understood at multiple levels.

Eventually, this became the normal way I met with people. I listened to what they loved to do and agreed to come along with them, knowing that a good conversation about what matters most was bound to happen. I had to get over the feeling that I was doing something wrong by not drinking coffee as a part of discipleship, something some of you may really struggle with! I had to get over the anxiety about what people would say if they heard I had gone fishing or hunting during "work hours" knowing that, as a church planter, my job is to reach people and make much of Jesus.

So, how does this apply to you? What do people in your small town like to do for fun? How can you join in? Are you creating unnecessary barriers between you and them before you ever get to the gospel because you are having them meet on your turf? Don't stay stuck in the office or the coffee shop if that is not the best way to love and engage people in your town.

RURAL CHURCH, SMALL TOWN

*Ghost Towns and Small Towns: Church Planting in a Boom and Bust World
representing God in places that have been burned by short booms and long busts | CHARLIE
COTHERMAN*

About 20 minutes from where I live, one can find the unfortunately named town of Pithole. At least one *could* have found the town had one been looking between January 1865 and August 1868. During these years, Pithole came to signify life in a boom and bust world.

After the first successful oil well was discovered on the bank of Pithole Creek in January of 1865, people rushed to the area seeking their fortunes. Some sought oil; others hoped to separate men from their new money. As oil boomed, so did the population, which grew to 2,000 by July of 1865 and nearly 20,000 by that December. Within two years, the town counted over 50 hotels. Some were mere rooming houses. Others boasted luxurious amenities. By September of 1865, Pithole even had a three-story theater with seating for 1,100.

By 1868, however, two devastating fires, failing oil reserves, and a local financial panic had triggered a mass exodus, leaving only a little over 200 residents in the once-vibrant town. Pithole's borough charter was annulled in 1877 and the land that had originally been sold for \$100,000 and made its investors millionaires was sold back to Venango County for \$4.37. Today, Pithole remains a quintessential ghost town.

Pithole is the most extreme example of the boom and bust economies that so often mark small and large places alike, especially in our country's Rust Belt region. Where I live, the boom was oil. In other places, the boom was cars, steel, or (*insert your local manufacturing plant here*). You get my point.

All across the Rust Belt and much of rural America, work dried up or shipped out, sometimes down South, sometimes overseas. With the notorious exception of cities like Detroit, however, most larger cities were able to reinvent themselves. Places like Pittsburgh found ways to claim the best of their blue-collar heritage while still managing to find their place in the emerging information economy.

The Impact of Boom or Bust on Small Towns

Small towns navigate this new post-industrial world with much more difficulty. Some small towns with exceptional foresight or fortuitous connections to natural beauty, government contracts, or the institutions that still prove lucrative in our economy survive and sometimes even thrive.

Most rural places and small towns, however, are not so fortunate. In these places, the allure of the boom is strong, but the bust is often long. Whether it is the hope of attracting a new manufacturing plant or dreams of Marcellus Shale being found under one's feet, small towns are often left in the lurch as dreams fade. For many rural and small towns, these realities are all too familiar. While we may not have many literal ghost towns, we do have towns where long-term economic decline, population loss, and brain drain exert deep influence and lay the groundwork for things like substance abuse, depression, and self-defeating attempts to tap into the boom economy through lottery tickets, casino gambling, or long-shot ambitions of hitting it big in sports or music.

(Finally!) A Place for Small Town Voices and Passion

What does all of this mean for small town and rural church planters? A lot. In the last year or two, major church-planting voices and networks have (finally!) begun to consider the plight of the rural poor and the Church's near complete failure to launch any kind of sustained church-planting efforts that take small town and rural America seriously.

For better or worse, we have a presidential election to thank for this new awareness of rural matters. It was an election that catered perfectly to the high-hype, boom-time dream that so many in America's forgotten places feel has eluded them. I'm not a political scientist, and I won't speculate on if or when this current political boom will bust. What I do know is that small town church planting must avoid capitulating to a boom-time mentality.

While people—especially young people, many of whom still live in rural areas and small towns—may long for a church plant to fulfill their Internet and mega-ministry-fueled boom-time expectations with better worship bands, hipper pastors, and cooler arts ministries than the tall-steeple churches that dot their town's corners,

rural church planters can't afford to simply ride on a wave of relevance or boom-time 'cool factor' in smaller places.

These approaches are incredibly enticing. In many small places, it does not take a lot to become the hip new church in town. The competition is simply not that steep. As church planters, however, we accept a boom-time mindset, where relationships take back seat to our own ambitions or seemingly neutral terms like 'production values' to our own peril and the peril of our congregations and towns. Although it might seem as if people in our towns want a hyped, mega-ministry approach, these efforts are very frequently unsustainable at best and hugely disappointing or harmful at worst.

Small town and rural church planting means representing God and His community in places that have often been burned by short booms and long busts. The history and current reality of many of these places call us as church planters, ministers, and Christians to preach and live a different hope—one that prioritizes relationships over hype, marketing, and quick fixes, a hope founded on the long-term faithfulness of God. In small places, the reality is, faithfulness over the long haul is both difficult and priceless.

Where Small Town America Is Thriving

By Joel Kotkin and Mark Schill, Forbes

Big city America has long demonstrated a distaste for its smaller cousins. This sentiment has, if anything, intensified with the election of President Donald Trump, whose improbable victory was made possible by strong support in small cities and towns across the country.

Once exemplars of de Tocquevillian American exceptionalism, now they're subject to such jibes as a Silicon Valley executive's infamous assertion last year that "no educated person wants to live in a s***hole with stupid people." And to be sure, "the little town blues" as Brookings has characterized it, are real: many of these smaller communities are in demographic decline as the ambitious young go elsewhere, leaving them ever whiter and older, and the departures of large company headquarters, such as ADM and Caterpillar, has been a blow.

Paul Krugman describes small city America's "ruin" as a historical inevitability in an era dominated by large, dense urban regions.

Yet America's smaller communities are far more diverse --- and have far greater potential -- than is commonly believed. The resurgence of manufacturing and energy development has helped many smaller towns (these sectors tend to be more critical to smaller economies). Recent demographic data show a movement away

from expensive coastal cities, including millennials, who tend to look for affordable single-family homes. The number of rural home mortgages has increased for five straight years, though the increase trails the rate in urban areas, and nearly twice as many millennials, according to the National Association of Realtors, bought home in small cities or rural areas last year than in denser urban areas.

Energizing Small City Growth

There is no question that opportunity is generated by agglomeration of talent and economic activity. Yet agglomeration creates benefits at the 10,000-person scale just as it does the 10 million-person scale. Local economic specialization and competitive advantage matter. Easier access to global markets and worker flexibility enabled by technology make local strategy execution more important, not less.

Many small cities present a promise of safety, quality education and work-life balance. The prospect of economic decentralization is a chance to leverage these qualities. However, success will not be evenly distributed. Only those small cities able to assemble the right mix of talent, market focus, and civic cooperation will succeed. Many small and rural places will not.

We have identified the stellar small places -- metropolitan areas with populations between 12,800 and 300,000 -- based on wages, and wage growth and job creation from 2007 to 2017. Even as most smaller towns have seen rather tepid job growth, these cities at the top of our list are outperforming not only their same-size counterparts, but some major urban competitors as well.

The Small Cities With The Strongest Economies

Surprisingly, our list of the best small areas for jobs does not include many of the scenic small communities that tend to attract affluent emigrés from large cities. Instead most of our leading areas from the last 10 years tend to be those driven by the energy industry, led by No. 1 Williston, North Dakota. With 36,000 people, Williston has been at the center of the shale oil boom in the state, growing its job count 121% since 2007. Wages have soared 47% to over \$68,000, well above the national median income of \$52,000.

Two other hot spots in North Dakota's Bakken shale boom: No. 3 Dickinson and No. 6 Minot.

Texas oil towns also figure prominently: No. 2 Midland and No. 4 Andrews. In addition to our overall ranking, we looked for the small cities with the strongest growth in particular sectors. Newton, Iowa, which ranks second on our list of energy cities, pivoted after the economic disaster of a shuttered Maytag plant to become a hub for wind power manufacturing.

Manufacturing Cities

Over the last few decades, manufacturing has been shifting from densely populated regions of the country to more rural areas. A recent surge in manufacturing investment -- such as Foxconn's planned \$10 billion electronics plant to open in 2020 in Mount Pleasant, Wisc., a city of 26,000 -- has benefited some smaller cities and towns, where land is inexpensive, energy often cheap and the labor force is seeking higher paid, blue-collar work. Since 2010, the country has added a million industrial jobs, roughly half of what was lost in the recession.

Pullman, Wash., our No. 1 manufacturing small city, has seen industrial growth replace farming as the primary driver of its economy. The area, which abuts the Idaho border and is home to Washington State University, has 60% more industrial jobs per capita than the national average and since 2007 has more than doubled its industrial employment to nearly 2,800. The manufacturing job boom in Pullman has been fueled primarily by Schweitzer Engineering, a maker of electrical equipment. One striking thing about the small manufacturing hot spots is their diversity. Some have benefited from the domestic energy boom, which has contributed to strong industrial growth, like the Texas cities of Port Lavaca, Andrews and Palestine. No. 3 La Grange, Ga., where manufacturing employment has grown nearly 75% since 2007 to 11,700 jobs, is a carpet manufacturing hub and has attracted factories from Duracell, Caterpillar, and Korean companies including Kia Motors.

For No. 5 McPherson, Kansas, its 37% expansion in industrial jobs over the past decade has been driven by plastics, energy and equipment manufacturing, aided by low energy prices (it's located in the nation's "wind tunnel," ideal for wind energy generation). No. 4 Columbus, Ind., where Cummins Engines is based, has a per capita share of employment in manufacturing four and a half times the national average and has seen its industrial workforce grow by 22% over the decade, making it something of a model for industrial revival in small towns.

Business And Professional Service Hubs

Ideally the information age should allow smaller cities to compete for jobs in the largest sector of high-wage employment: business and professional services. Growth in high end jobs is very diverse and its leaders widely scattered. Our No. 1 area is Battle Creek, Mich., where the largest employers are Kellogg's and several auto-oriented manufacturers. Business service employment is up 133% since 2007 to 2,900 jobs in 2017, well above the national average growth of 15%, with particular growth in marketing and computer systems design. Anchored by manufacturers in textiles, paper products and HVAC equipment, No. 2 Bennettsville, S.C., has grown its business services sector from next to nothing a decade ago after strong expansion of engineering services.

The highest concentration of professional and scientific service jobs can be found in Los Alamos, N.M., where professional service jobs are, on a per capita basis some 9.8 times above the average. This may be something of a special case, as Los Alamos is home to a huge federal research center which seems to be spinning out a lot of technically oriented service jobs.

Emerging STEM Centers

It is widely assumed that high-tech employment, for the most part, will cluster either in big cities or their suburbs. But some venture funders, including some from Silicon Valley, are taking a look at smaller cities, notably in the Midwest. Several smaller cities have achieved growth in STEM jobs (science, technology, engineering and math-related) that are far above the national average over the past decade. Much of this has to do with the location of federal labs or universities. The leader, California-Lexington Park, located on Maryland's scenic eastern shore, has a strong presence in the aerospace and defense industries, and has seen its STEM employment, already 3.5 times the national average, grow 22.3% since 2007. Other STEM-rich smaller towns include the afore-mentioned Los Alamos, No. 8 Kennewick-Richland, Wash., home to the Hanford federal laboratory, No. 4 Lawrence, Kansas, home of the University of Kansas and No. 9 Bremerton-Silverdale, Wash., home to the Puget Sound naval shipyard.

Less predictable however has been the STEM growth in No. 3 Jackson, Mich., where a large public utility and post-recession growth of automotive and machinery manufacturing may explain a surprising 26.4% growth in STEM. Jackson is a hub for engineering talent, where the engineering job count is up 44% in the last decade and now 3.2 times more concentrated than national average.

The Road Ahead

Smaller communities often suffer from thin talent pools and long distances from major markets, but as our survey tells us, not all are destined to decline. High-end service jobs have been leaving San Francisco and New York for less crowded and expensive cities like Salt Lake and Dallas. This same formula could lead more firms, and skilled individuals, to smaller places, such as Ft. Wayne or Carmel, Indiana which have been refurbishing their central districts in part to attract or retain younger workers.

Politics could play a role. Even some progressives believe federal agencies should be dispersed to places like the Midwest, which would provide stable employment. The newly proposed Trump infrastructure program places considerable emphasis on rural areas, which after all supported him heavily. This is particularly critical for the poorly maintained nation's internal waterways, the lifeblood of many smaller cities in the interior. And manufacturers have been boosting investment after the passage of tax reform, which could be an opportunity for smaller cities. Some airlines are now

boosting local service, something which could connect these places with the broader economy. At the same time, Trump's attempts to restructure NAFTA, gut the Farm Bill, or cut rural development and small manufacturer assistance programs could pose threats to smaller cities.

Resuscitating small town economies is critical for all Americans. As migration rates have dropped and high housing costs make a shift to big cities increasingly difficult, we can no longer expect residents of small towns to move en masse to San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles or Chicago. Rather than write off the roughly one-fifth of Americans who live in such places, we should look to expand the map of economic opportunity, taking advantage of our continental scale and economic diversity.

WHY MILLENNIALS ARE AVOIDING SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

By Beau Dure

"Most of the young people that go to college go away, and then they don't come back," observes Lee Bianchi, a retired engineer who lived in Clinton, Iowa (pop. 26,647), from 1961 to 2008.

That's long been the storyline in small-town America, which has for decades bled citizens — especially young ones — to the more glamorous metropolis. One might have thought technology would stanch the flow, at least among millennials: With Wi-Fi and telecommuting, young people could theoretically pass on overpriced real estate and ugly commutes and opt, instead, for a spacious house with a big yard and a broadband connection.

But it turns out the millennial generation is only accelerating the demographic shift. In fact, this may be the most "bright lights, big city" generation in history. While the number of millennials is ticking slightly upward in small towns and rural areas, it's nothing compared with the growth of their numbers in suburbs and cities. "At this point, the prognosis does not look good for much of small town America," writes William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution.

CITY TERMINOLOGY

Metropolitan: a region with a core urban area (not necessarily confined to a city limit) of 50,000 or more. These include suburbs and often exurbs.

Micropolitan: a region with a core urban area of 10,000 to 49,999. These are the small towns that are stagnant or declining.

The kids aren't just flocking to the city proper, either, but to the metropolis writ large, including the fancier suburbs. The top destination for millennials is the D.C. suburb of Arlington, Virginia, where their ranks grew by a staggering 82 percent between 2007 and 2013. Arlington's median home sale price is \$557,250, and in just 10 of the 290 Arlington apartments listed on Zillow could you live alone for less than \$1,200 a month; a couple of them might even give you more than 600 square feet to knock around in. An enterprising millennial with a flexible employer might hop across the Chesapeake Bay to the historic district of Cambridge, Maryland (pop. 12,690), with a porch overlooking the Choptank River. With a thriving downtown and arts district, Cambridge was No. 10 on Livability's list of Best Small Towns in 2013. Homes go for \$164,154, and a monthly \$1,200 rental will get you a detached house or a 1,600-square-foot townhouse.

But affordable real estate and waterfront views don't have millennials biting. They "continue a multigenerational pattern of young adults preferring more expensive urban areas over lower-cost rural ones because the lifestyles and opportunities in such places make the extra burden of cost worth it," says Robert Lang, professor of urban growth and population dynamics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Which is to say: Getting to a big city — or at least near one — still has the smell of success. "We don't all hail from small Midwestern towns, but most came from places where they felt limited — small town Maine, suburban west Texas, California's Central Valley and the Inland Empire," wrote 20-something Brittany Shoot of her friends and neighbors in the San Francisco Bay Area. "It's easy to find people who will sneeringly complain about how trapped they felt as teenagers."

Small towns will have to hustle to recruit and retain millennials, experts say. The American Planning Association urges local planners to mimic the appeal of city centers by creating "density." That means keeping the walkable neighborhoods and traditional town centers that millennials say is key to making a community a desirable place to live. Smart-growth advocate James A. Bacon sees opportunities to fight off "brain drain" and attract urban "escapees" who start small businesses, but he worries that towns aren't taking advantage. "Unfortunately, to date, local economic developers have stuck with the industrial-recruitment strategy that bears less and less fruit," Bacon writes.

But without economic opportunity — that is, good jobs — the most charming downtown in the world can't attract permanent residents. Small towns may have to reinvent themselves, according to experts like Frey of the Brookings Institution.

THIS GENERATION IS MOVING TO AREAS WHERE THE RENTS AND MORTGAGES ARE HIGH.

But all is not lost. The numbers that point toward the decline of small towns also show a positive narrative for millennials, and perhaps a sunnier economic outlook than you'd expect. Notwithstanding student-loan debt and the stereotype of living in their parents'

basements, a RealtyTrac analysis released in September showed that this generation is moving where the rents and mortgages are high. Arlington is just the tip of of it. From 2007 to 2013, the 10 counties that gained the most millennial residents had a median home price of \$406,800. And the average population of those counties was 587,522 — a far cry from small-town living. Baby boomers filled out the other side of the equation by flocking to counties with average populations of 261,232 and a median home price of \$144,875.

So the best answer as to why millennials are moving away from smaller towns may be simple: because they can. And small towns will have to rev up their sales pitch to convince young adults that they can live not just cheaply but also well in the places that older generations called home.

Denominational Challenge for Rural Church Planting

Challenge CHURCH PLANTING, RURAL CHURCH, SMALL TOWN

Five Things Small Town Church Planters Wish Their Denominational Leaders Knew
Planters in rural America feel misunderstood and ignored. | JOEL SEYMOUR

The last night of our 2 1/2 day conference was coming to an end. I was feeling pretty good that we had pulled off our first Multiply Vineyard Small Town USA church planting conference. Our two presenters did a fantastic job giving the nuts and bolts of planting and doing multisite in a rural context. It wasn't just theory—they had done it in central Illinois and northern Wisconsin. It went well, but I wondered if it really had impacted the attendees. I would soon get my answer. A couple in their early 40s came up to me with tears in their eyes. "Thank you so much for putting this together. This is the first church planting conference where we felt understood," the husband said. They went on to tell me they were planters and pastors in Wisconsin.

Not long after that couple got into their van for the 10 1/2 hour drive back home, another couple from Missouri approached me. They too had tears in their eyes. "This is the first church planting training where we felt understood," the husband said. "We went to other trainings where we were told we should take a team of 50 from our home church to plant in our town. Our home church only has 75 people and there aren't 50 jobs in the town we're moving to." Planters in rural America are often misunderstood at best and ignored at worst.

Here are five things small town planters wish their denominational leaders understood.

1. We would love to come to your meetings, but Bi-Vos don't get paid to attend.

While many pastors attend seminary thinking they will be fully funded pastors, the reality is many pastors are bi-vocational. It is difficult to get an accurate number on how many pastors are bi-vo as only recently have denominations begun to survey their churches about the topic. And if bi-vos don't have time to attend your meetings, they probably don't have time to fill out your survey. Just how many churches are pastored by bi-vos? I have seen numbers from 28 percent to 50 percent and beyond. The point is that bi-vos care about their denominational cluster meetings but they are busy working a mainstream job in order to fund their ministry. Why not consider raising funds to pay a bi-vo to come to your yearly conference? Or do what I have been told the American Baptists do: have your multi-day conference, but make sure content that applies to small town churches is on Saturday so pastors don't have to miss work.

2. Our flock may exceed your favorite megachurch's attendance.

A small town pastor's yearly survey doesn't look impressive in the age where we publicize the largest and fastest growing churches. But small town pastors know

their flock is not who shows up on Sundays. Their flock includes the mayor who attends another church four or five times a year. It includes the rough-around-the-edges mechanic who fixes the pastor's car. It includes the clerk at the local mom and pop grocery store. Small town pastors perform these folk's weddings, do funerals for their loved ones, dedicate their babies, and give counsel to people who may never step foot in their church building. It is safe to assume that in many small towns, the pastor's flock *is* the population of that town.

3. It would be nice to put one of us on stage.

When small town pastors do make it to their denomination's yearly conference, they rarely if ever see someone like them on stage. While a denomination's average church size may hover around 100, their pastors will hear presenters whose average church size is ten times that. Imagine how encouraging it would be if a rural pastor walked into a conference and listened to a pastor from rural Indiana whose church hosts the only food pantry and recovery service in town and averages 96 people each Sunday!

4. Find some metrics that celebrate small town churches.

Most small town pastors I know love the large churches in their denominations. They rejoice with their fellow pastors and planters who see rapid growth. They even tear up when they hear of hundreds even thousands of first-time decisions coming from a single church. They celebrate as their denominational leaders present these stories at meetings. But they also wish they picked some metrics that celebrated small town church accomplishments too. What metrics could be used to celebrate churches in villages and towns? How about the number of first-time commitments vs. average Sunday attendance. In a recent meeting I witnessed a church of 100 being celebrated because they had 104 first-time decisions the previous year. Denominations could also celebrate small rural churches who are extremely generous to their denomination's mission fund. Another metric could be largest percentage of average Sunday attendance vs. town population. I know several churches of 300 in towns of 3000. Percentage wise, that would be like a church of 220,000 in Houston. Now that's a megachurch by any standard!

5. We would love for you to visit us sometime.

I recently had a conversation with a pastor friend who is planting a church in our town. He recounted how he never hears from his denomination's planting coordinator but he sees plenty of pictures of him having lunch with pastors of big or fast growing churches. My friend is a great pastor who loves his people and serves as a chaplain for our law enforcement personnel. He has sacrificed much to plant this church and has yet to take any pay from his church. Small town pastors want to know they matter. Speaking at their church or even just a simple visit lets them know that you care not only about what they do, but about them. In 2016, Vineyard's national director Phil Strout spent three days at our Small Town USA conference. He only spoke at one session, but was present at all sessions and all meals. Our team of speakers did a great job, but we all agreed that what made the most impact was our movement's top leader spending time with pastors and planters from small churches and small towns. His presence communicated that their calling—and indeed they themselves—mattered to our tribe.