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PARISHING PODUNK:
REIMAGINING CIRCUIT RIDING MINISTRY IN THE RURAL CONTEXT

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by
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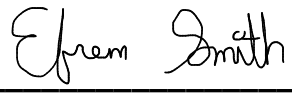

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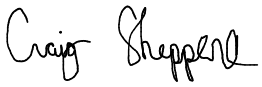

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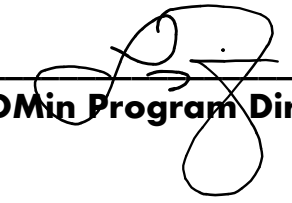

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ABSTRACT

Kason L. Oakes

Parishing Podunk
Reimagining Circuit Riding Ministry in the Rural Context

The Church of the Nazarene is facing challenges in supplying its rural churches with pastoral leadership. The decline in population and limited access to resources contribute to the lack of interest in pastoring rural congregations. Doctrinal-trained leadership is limited to many rural congregations and results in a lack of sound missional engagement with their community and to the world. Therefore, the rural church struggles to engage in ministry that makes a significant impact. In what ways can the Church of the Nazarene reimagine the practices of rural ministry? This dissertation will evaluate the rural culture, theology, and practices that inform rural churches' ministry. It will consider Trinitarian theology that supports a multi-site ministry model that embraces the circuit-riding pastor in the Wesleyan heritage. The purpose is to consider the theology that develops significant, sustaining ministry and informs congregational resource sharing to address dwindling pastor leadership in the rural context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of what goes into this work is because of a cloud of influencers. I cannot help but reminisce about Rev. C. Wesley Miller. Wesley poured his life into me for 7 years until his tragic passing. Wesley was as “Podunk” as preachers come with one pant leg tucked in his boots and Bible-toting in his hand. He was quick-witted and could preach on every man’s level. The depths of his theological knowledge was unmatched by his appearance. He didn’t have an educational resume or pedigree but understood the rural culture, theology, and practice. I can’t help but think that this dissertation was heavily influenced by my mentor and friend, Clyde “Wesley” Miller.

I married my best friend and consummate partner in life on May 23, 2009. Casandra has been my rock in navigating the parenthood of three boys, three church contexts, and one big pandemic. I would not have dreamed of pursuing higher education without her belief in me. Casandra has more confidence in me than I do in myself. Thank you for being the motivator in this endeavor and pushing me to continue when I wanted to give up. Thank you for pretending to enjoy listening to my internal dialogues.

This dissertation is done largely through a special group of people who valued education for their lead pastor. There are too many to list but they are a community of people known as the Watonga Church of the Nazarene. Many rural parishes do not value higher education, but you invested in me when you didn’t have to. You made space to take chances on failures and attempted to do ministry outside the status quo. Thank you for being a sending church. You have sent and commissioned people to Native American Christian Academy (NACA), to neighboring Nazarene churches that need leadership, me to start a PAC in Okeene, OK, and any member that has moved into a new geographical location. God has a sending nature, and so do you. Although it is not in our sinful nature to share, it is through the vision of a redeemed church that we embrace sending and sharing resources. Many of the community believe that Watonga, OK is better because Watonga Church of the Nazarene is in it. Thank you for valuing people, nurturing friendships, and making space for people not like yourself. It is what makes this church so great. Thank you for covenanting with the Oakes family to prayerfully and intentionally protect us as a family. It was stated at the very beginning, “Our prayer is that our church never does anything that will harm you as a family.” Thank you for keeping your covenant with us.

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INTRODUCTION

THE RURAL PROBLEM

A specific title exists for the isolated populated areas of the United States. It is not a title of endearment. It is a nickname saturated with the overtones of a place and a people that are undervalued, overlooked, and insignificant. Usually, the title is associated with the rural towns and communities that are accessed by county roads or highways that are off the interstates. The name that has been given to these communities is “Podunk.” You can probably hear the stories of people that say, “I was driving and got lost, and I found myself in this ‘Podunk’ town.” What you will find in those “Podunk” communities are people that hold on to structures that are valuable to their own culture as a community. Post offices, schools, fueling stations, and fire departments are just a few structures that the rural community places on high value. One structure you will always find in the central part of the community is a place of worship.

In John 1:46, we see Philip filled with excitement and expectation to invite his friend Nathanael to come and see Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael replies with a sarcastic overtone, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” This disdainful reference to a place called Nazareth is an overlooked and forgotten town of Jesus’s

humble childhood beginnings. No one in the gospel era would seek or assume the Messiah would come from Nazareth. Historically, Nazareth was one of the most insignificant places during that time. Yet, this inconsequential providence is attached to Jesus's name. Nazareth is just another "Podunk" town.

In the Church of the Nazarene (CTN), we have celebrated a century of grass-root developments where its people have sought after and ministered to the overlooked and marginalized. From its conception, the CTN has always valued the ministry to the "lowly." J.P. Widney is a historically familiar name of the CTN as one of the influential characters of its beginnings. It has been said that the name of the Church of the Nazarene came to Widney after a night of praying. Holiness Today chronicles this historical moment stating, "In adopting the name, early Nazarenes believed that Jesus of Nazareth, who identified with the lowly, 'toiling masses of the world,' is the One for whom our Church should be named."[1] Essentially, it is this phrase that harkens back to the Nathanael disdain that the CTN derives its name. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" It is the name "Nazareth" that the church should continue to form its methodological cues by planting its effort and resources in such places. Let us consider the rural context much like a place like Nazareth. As said by Donnie Griggs, "Simply put, Jesus was from a small town, so for the Christians to not love small towns is, at the very least, concerning."[2] Jesus's connection to Nazareth signifies that God uses insignificant places for His purposes.

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[1] "Archives' Answers: The Denomination's Name," *Holiness Today*, Church of the Nazarene, (June 7, 2012), https://www.holinesstoday.org/imported-news/archives-answers-the-denominations-name.

[2] Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places* (Damascus, MD: Everyday Truth, 2016), 43.

Much of the scholarship on rural ministry spends significant effort in pleading the case for doing ministry in the rural context. The 2016 US Census reports that the rural population accounts for 19 percent of the United States population. That is 61 million people.[3] If the church has an evangelical bone in its body, it should strike her as a significant place of ministry because it accounts for 61 million souls. Unfortunately, that number is spread throughout a vast geographical terrain throughout the States. The deficiency of pastoral candidates available causes the resources that are needed to shepherd and evangelize these areas to be scarce.

Although the Church of the Nazarene recognizes its roots in the urban core of Los Angeles, California, and its organization in 1908, we can trace its migration out of the city and urban areas to less densely populated areas in this century.[4] The Church of the Nazarene presence is not as strongly represented in the rural communities compared to its other protestant partners, but of the 5,068 active congregations in the Church of the Nazarene's USA/Canada regions, 49 percent are in small towns to rural community types.[5] Therefore almost half of the congregations represented in the USA/Canada Church of the Nazarene are from "Podunk."

Within these community-type congregations, almost half of the Church of the Nazarene is represented in "Podunk" areas, but roughly one out of ten rural congregations

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[3] "Rural America: How Does the Census Bureau Define Rural? ," US Census Bureau, 2010. https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=49cd4bc9c8eb444ab51218c1d5001ef6.

[4] David A. Busic, *The City: Urban Churches in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Foundry Publishing, 2020). 15.

[5] Kenneth Crow, "The Corps of Pastors in the USA/Canada Region Church of the Nazarene" (Lenexa, KS: Research Services Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 2017), http://www.nazareneresearch.com. 7.

do not have a pastor.[6] The Church of the Nazarene has recognized a global pastoral shortage. The church finds itself in an age where their "Boomer" clergy, representing a large population in USA/Canada, have reached retirement age. The Global Ministry Center of the Church of the Nazarene states:

> New pastors needed to fill the positions that will be left vacant by the large number of retirements will probably come from several sources. Some may be returning pastors who have been temporarily out of the corps for financial, health, family, or other reasons. Others come from the younger decade of the Boomer generation who are retiring from other careers and have sensed God's call to finish their working lives as pastors. It seems likely, however, that most new additions to the corps of Nazarene pastors in the USA/Canada Region will come from the generation born between about 1980 and the mid-1990s, the group that is often labeled the Millennial generation.[7]

The Church of the Nazarene will need to address the pastoral shortage or find creative ways to fill vacant positions.

There is a tribal knowledge in the clergy circle that many use the rural church as a stepping stone or practice run for the next parish they will lead. Nonetheless, many begin the exercises of pastoral leadership in the rural context. It is the location where young men and women try, fail, succeed, and grow in ministry.[8] Some of which are today's major contributors to theology. Names like Karl Barth, Eugene Peterson, and John Calvin are theologians that began practicing ministry in a small parish. Allen T. Stanton says, "It is worth mentioning that the spread of Christianity is the result of small-membership churches… The spread of Methodism in the United States was not despite its rural nature;

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[6] Statistics offered by the Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center. Rev. Richard Houseal. Research Services, Director. Richard Houseal, *Church Stats*, 2020.

[7] Crow, *The Corps of Pastors in the USA/Canada Region Church of the Nazarene*, 14.

[8] Allen T. Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural: Building Thriving Rural Congregations* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 97.

it was because of it."[9] We can conclude that much of our theology is birthed out of the rural context. For this reason, we need strong, healthy rural congregations. The rural church needs solid and effective leadership, and our pastors need the safety and stability by which many rural institutions are characterized.

The decline of church attendance across the United States has rippled its effects on all denominations and most congregations. On top of that, urbanization has created a multifaceted issue specifically for rural ministries. Attendance and population have caused ecclesial challenges in rural communities. Therefore, the rural church grapples with its capacity to do ministry in its rural context and questions its existence. Glenn Daman, an author who has spent his life caring for and studying the importance of rural church ministry states, "The reasons that pastors overlook rural ministry are complex. The financial package the rural church offers, the lack of prestige, the lack of young pastors willing to go to rural areas, and the focus of seminaries and Bible colleges on urban ministries all contribute to the problem."[10] In pastoral placement, new ministers usually get their first assignments in the rural context with the hopes of "graduating" to the city areas. This also creates a sustainability paradox for the rural church.

Regardless of the source of pastoral placement, the same study would reveal that only 60 percent of newly ordained elders of the Church of the Nazarene have formal education from Nazarene institutions.[11] The lack of pastoral leadership and education creates a crisis for the churches in smaller populated areas. We are living in a culture and

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[9]Ibid. 101.

[10] Glenn Daman, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018), 226-227.

[11] Crow, *The Corps of Pastors in the USA/Canada Region Church of the Nazarene*, 9.

a climate of rapid change and need pastoral leadership that is equipped to help churches navigate through that environment. A greater sense of a pluralistic worldview has affected the church's understanding of its existence and mission with each varying culture. Notably, the Western church culture is diagnosed with a preoccupation with statistics and growth, rather than spiritual health and validity. This preoccupation has plagued the Western, rural church and has measured its success upon worship attendance. Although numbers are good for accountability and an instrument for measuring growth, we need to evaluate ministry from a significant standard, rather than a measurement of success. What is meant by "significant ministry" is more in terms of the depths of discipleship and community engagement. Therefore, is there another instrument to help the rural church measure its significance in fulfilling God's purpose for the local body? These are challenging questions and times for formally educated pastors, let alone clergy with limited availability and access to formal or continuing education.

The rural church is a vulnerable placement for clergy because isolation is part of the culture. Many community types are labeled "rural" because of their isolation and lack of access to particular resources. This isolation within the clergy creates a lonely environment where critical theological thinking is not accompanied by fellowship. Theology should not be done in isolation or without the accountability of constant fellowship of other clergies. Solid, formal, theological education can help pastors stay grounded in mission and practice. Without continual fellowship or education, we cannot expect our clergy to lead flourishing ministries in rural settings.

The Church of the Nazarene affirms its heritage deeply connected to the Wesleyan-Methodist movement in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Methodist movement

is characterized by unique modes and methods to evangelize and disciple. The rural areas were of deep concern to Methodists, who did not want to overlook the isolated frontiers of the expanding United States. The concept of rural parishioners was commissioned and labeled as "circuit riders." Elmer Suderman claims that in 1771, there were only six Methodist preachers and 600 Methodists. Within 40 years, there were 700 preachers and more than 200,000 Methodist members as a result of the innovation of circuit riding pastors.[12] Can this same innovative spirit help the CTN in today's rural popular culture?

Although many small towns to rural community types are declining in population, they are not going away. The small community Church of the Nazarene represents almost half of its congregations. The CTN will continue to need to find creative ways to support and sustain its congregations in these demographics. How can the Church of the Nazarene stabilize its rural impact? Are there theological deficiencies due to the lack of training and availability of clergymen and women within the smaller community types? Can we reclaim our identity within the Methodist heritage as innovators reclaiming the rural congregations as we witness through circuit-riding pastors? If the Church of the Nazarene fails to reimagine its capacity to do ministry in these community types, it will struggle to do ministry that makes significance within those communities. Stanton gives us a rural foundational description when he says:

> Some rural congregations are places of deep community and represent the best of our faith, others are toxic systems, dominated by a few bullies. Some churches are destined to die, and it is our duty to help them die well. Some churches have been presented as terminal when the diagnostic tools are far from accurate. If we are to help more rural churches and their communities thrive, we need to be able to navigate the ways these narratives have conditioned us to view congregations, so that we might

[12] Elmer F. Suderman, "The Circuit Rider: An Example of Nineteenth Century Popular Culture," *Popular Culture Association in the South* 4, no Spring, (1981): 24.

> offer indicators of vitality that capture the diversity and divergence of our rural space. That means that we must, to some degree, resist the urge to resort to our standard narratives.[13]

This paper attempts to embrace this challenge in the rural church context. This body of work challenges how we conceive and organize our smaller community-type congregations, particularly in the rural context. The effort placed upon this dissertation is mainly through the lens of the Watonga Church of the Nazarene in Western Oklahoma and broader in the rural context of the Church of the Nazarene. Still, it carefully considers its Wesleyan heritage and missional theology to undergird better rural church practices. In addition, a review of what makes the rural church and its context unique in culture and theology will aid us in navigating such practices.

[13] Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural*, 19-20.

PART ONE

RURAL CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS RURAL?

There is general knowledge and assumptions of what it means to be rural. But the term "rural" is constantly redefined with the ebbs and flows of population migration. There does not seem to be a universal meaning to the term "rural." Just saying "rural" may evoke different meanings in different parts of the world. For our purposes, we will concentrate on what it means to be rural in the regions of the United States and Canada. When locals hear the phrase, "I'm from rural Oklahoma," they see a way of life. They visualize a landscape with flatlands as far as the eye could see and oil pump-jacks sprinkled throughout the vast grass-pastures with grazing cattle. Those who do not consider themselves in rural types would simply assume a cultural image of resources and lifestyles contrary to urban life.

The U.S. Census Bureau confirms that "rural" is simply a location or area that "encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area."[14] But Suzanne Smith contests that the category of rural is "an outmoded category shed by

[14] US Census Bureau, "Urban and Rural," *The United States Census Bureau*, (2016), https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html.

the advance of history."[15] In the United States and Canada, we live in the age of hyper-tech and travel, where everyone has more connectivity than ever before. Therefore, in Smith's mind, the categories of urban and rural hold no relevance. Yet, JoAnn Jaffe and Michael Gertler argue that it is time to redefine the word altogether based on sociological implications. They write:

> The new rural sociology has had an impact on the definition of the term "rural." The original "rural" of the rural sociology referred to spaces and places that had been created through unequal processes of development. In the mid-20th century, however, many rural sociologists adopted a more functional approach to defining rural, which viewed it as having social, demographic, physical, and geographical features. Rural connoted small population centers and low population densities, involvement in primary production, and interaction with nature.[16]

The term "rural" has evolved over the centuries. We have seen the term attached to places of complete isolation to a community mindset. Today, "rural" becomes harder to specify. Being rural is more than a geographical, isolated location, but it is now also a combination of values, culture, and population that make up a community.

The Church of the Nazarene Research Center has 11 community types used to categorize community types for their congregations. Each of the community types is described below in Table 1.1.[17]

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[15] Suzanne Smith, "The Institutional and Intellectual Origins of Rural Sociology," Paper, Rural Sociological Society 74th Annual Meeting, (July 28-31, 2011), 16-17, http://www.ag.auburn.edu/~baililc/Smith.2011.pdf.

[16] JoAnn Jaffe and Michael Gertler, "Rural Sociology," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13.

[17] "USA/Canada Region," USA/Canada Region (Church of the Nazarene Headquarters, October 10, 2005), https://www.usacanadaregion.org/sites/usacanadaregion.org/files/analysisofurbanpop.pdf.

Table 1.1. Nazarene Community Types

Community Type	Minimum 1 Mile Pop. Radius	Minimum 3 Mile Pop. Radius	Minimum 5 Mile Pop. Radius
Major Urban Core	15,000	100,000	250,000
Large Cities	10,000	25,000	100,000
Fringe Major Urban	-	10,000	100,000
Small City or Suburban	5,000	25,000	50,000
Suburban	-	10,000	50,000
Small City Core	5,000	10,000	25,000
Fringe City	-	2,000	25,000
Small Town	2,500	2,000	5,000
Bordering Small Town	-	5,000	5,000
Near Small Town	-	-	5,000
Rural	-	-	-

These community types were simply categorized not by principles, culture, or geography, but by population. What is common with small towns to near small-town community types is a 5-mile radius population of 5,000 people.

For the sake of this research, we are using the term “rural” when it is attached to a community. Rural Sociologists Cornelia and Jan Flora define the concept of “community” in three different ways. The first is “a location in which a group of people interact with one another. The second use of the term looks at the social system itself, the organization or set of organizations through which a group of people meet their needs. Finally, sociologists use the word to describe a shared sense of identity held by a group of

people."[18] Since rural has become redefined within this century, there is a term now being used for populations that are in decline and are not associated with metropolitan centers. It is called "rural and remote."[19] A lot of these communities have had not only a rapid population decline but also a loss of community infrastructures such as city hall, post office, and local schools.

Cornelia and Jan Flora discovered that communities, regardless of their population, have assets or resources that foster thriving communities. These communities strive for healthier ecosystems and inclusions for all community members. They identify seven resources of every community categorized as "capital." Although there are multiple categories of capital, the word will be used in broad terminology as "assets are invested in creating new resources."[20] This word "capital" will be used later when we discuss "asset-based ministry" regarding the church and its people and also the capital that can be built with clergy and community building.

Many would assume that rural America is culturally defined by farming, homogeneous culture, and tight-knit communities. But on the contrary, each rural community differs from the others as most urban areas differ. One will find that rural communities have diversity in culture and ethnicity. In general, we can define rural by its size and location. Because the term is so broad, we will deal with communities categorized in lower populated counties with significant distances to a metropolitan area.

Rural Local Ministry Context

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[18] Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L. Flora, and Stephen P. Gasteyer, *Rural Communities: Legacy + Change,* (New York: Avalon Publishing, 2015), 15.

[19] Ibid, 24-25.

[20] Ibid. 15-16.

Rural, agriculture, and oil are three words that describe Watonga, Oklahoma. Watonga is "rural" based on the numerical population, proximity to urban resources, and a cultural mindset. The city has roughly 3000 people and is declining due to falling oil prices that fuel the oil industry. The community consists of 60 percent Caucasian, 10 percent African American, 10 percent Native American, 10 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 5 percent other races.[21] Those statistics would be considered one of the most diverse communities in the northwest quadrant of Oklahoma.

Jimmy Caldwell recently moved to Watonga from the areas of Dallas and Oklahoma City. He observes, "You've got to drive to get or do anything. It's 30 minutes to the nearest Walmart." For the locals, having a Walmart signifies the difference between rural and urban or stagnation and progression. Driving is a way of life for people who live in Watonga. Many have found jobs in the city, roughly 120 miles round trip. A drive to Oklahoma City, Enid, or Woodward becomes a normal part of everyday life for folks who want to live in Watonga. The resources are available for the commuter mindset. Many are comfortable with the commute because they prefer the lifestyle a rural community offers.

Agriculture is the industry that runs deep in Watonga in which multiple generations of farmers and ranchers in families of all races contribute. It is a terrain of flatland that covers as far as the eye can see in this Western Oklahoma farming community. Farming wheat fields make the scenery green during the winter and amber in the summer months. When the wind shifts after a heavy rain, the smell of the cattle feedlot east of town perfumes the air. Most locals would comment after a deep sniff,

[21]AreaVibes Inc., "Watonga, OK Demographics," (2016), https://www.areavibes.com/watonga-ok/demographics/.

“Smells like money.” Wheeler Brothers Grain Company has made its living off of grain and has long been a pillar of the community. They have staked their claim as a “pillar” as they have built towering grain silos that cast shadows on the corner of the only four-way stoplight that never seems to work, only blink.

A person can learn much about what drives a community based on which vehicles are driven. Spend a few minutes at that busy intersection of Highways 33 and 183 watching impatient drivers waiting for the right time to proceed through the blinking light, and it becomes apparent that most of the vehicles will be flatbed pickups and semi-trucks hauling cattle or hay. The other automobiles seen are service trucks or semis representing some oil field company with their logo on the sides. The oil field industry has historically boosted the economy of Watonga. Some believe that the only economy it has helped is those with land or oil rights, such as the farmers. Others would state that a robust oil industry supports the small businesses in town. In either case, there has been a recent decline in oil field production, which has caused a mass exodus of residents or families with lower incomes “stranded” and struggling to find other sources of work in Watonga. Cory Russell, a lifetime local who is struggling to make ends meet, says, “I wish the oil field would pick back up so I can make some real money.”

Education is one of the challenges that Watongans face. Public schools and technology centers are resources available to the community, but other elements contribute to the average citizen's educational levels. Twenty-two percent of Watongans have less than a high school education, and the poverty rate almost matches that statistic at 17 percent.[22] Sociologists have pinpointed an association between poverty and lower

[22] Church of the Nazarene, “Community Demographics,” (Church of the Nazarene Research Services, 2021),

educational rates contributing to incarcerations, substance abuse, family disruptions, and other crimes.[23]

There is a tension between the two mindsets of locals that are observed in how locals view their town. One vantage point is rear-facing, and the other is future-facing. Rear-facing takes the posture of despair and self-absorption. This mindset is considered cynical about change and is preoccupied with how things were or how they used to be. In other words, they believe that Watonga has already seen its brightest days. Many locals would point the blame for this attitude of cynicism as a product of local government. Tina Willis, an alumnus of Watonga High School who recently moved back from Arizona, says:

> I have been away from the community for 20 years and decided to come back to take care of my parents' estate. It was surprising to me that this small community has changed very little over the past 20 years. I still see segregation and fear of change. Now that I am a resident here, I cannot be satisfied with just letting my community slip through the cracks. I would like this community to change because I believe our little community has so much to offer. From what I can tell from the people I talk to, there seems to be a lot of mistrust that Watongans have with the city council.

The other mindset is forward-facing and has great hope for a bright future and self-empowerment to make positive changes within the community. Some residents are optimistic about community building and are involved in community movements like

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https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/education.html?y=4278719.927818588&x=-10955291.88228747&b=3.

[23] Hélio Manhica et al., "Association between Poverty Exposure during Childhood and Adolescence, and Drug Use Disorders and Drug‐related Crimes Later in Life," *Addiction 116, no. 7* (2021): 1747–56, https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15336.

OneWatonga,[24] Watonga Chamber of Commerce, and Watonga Made.[25] These organizations have attempted to evaluate the needs of the community and pull resources to address them. Both mentalities would agree that the community is strong but will need to experience change for the town's future, whether recovering from past successes or discovering new ones.

Within this local context, a subculture is formed within the Protestant and Catholic traditions. Within this decreasing populated area, there is a saturation of Christian congregations. Twenty-two congregations are accounted for within the four-mile radius that makes up the town of Watonga, Oklahoma.[26] The estimated population (as of 2019) for the community of Watonga, Oklahoma, was 4,500 people. That is a 205:1 ratio of citizens to church accounted for within the community. One of the larger congregations within Watonga, based on membership and worship size comparatively, is the local Church of the Nazarene.

The Watonga Church of the Nazarene is a little over a century-old congregation with an average morning worship service attendance between 97-106 over the past decade.[27] As stated before, agriculture, rural, and oil are three words that describe the culture and context of Watonga, Oklahoma. These three cultural norms have influenced the economics, theology, and social makeup of the congregation. The agricultural

[24] OneWatonga is a community action group that focuses on the physical appearance of the community and the revitalization of downtown buildings and business.

[25] Watonga Made is a private affiliated Alumni association that focuses on community pride and sports.

[26] "Blaine County Church Directory," *Watonga Republican*, August 17, 2022, Volume 129, 46 edition.

[27] Church of the Nazarene, "Annual Report: Watonga Church of the Nazarene" (Kansas City, MO, 2022).

influence is represented through the lens of the liturgical images flashed on television screens, banners, and artwork within the worship spaces.

Within the last decade, "grace"' is the theological word that informs many of the communal practices of this local body. The mission statement for the church states, "A place where you can receive, share, and extend God's grace." Much of the artwork and banners ring with heavy agricultural overtones referencing the congregation's identity through God's grace. Three liturgical images are of the stages a seed of wheat goes through until maturity. Matthew 13's Parable of the Sower informs the first image. It is an image of a hand pouring seeds. It is about the grace we all can receive from the hand of a loving God. The second image is of an opened hand with a sprouted, germinated seedling. This image is about the grace that we share that begins with the grace received from God. In our worship practices, one will witness opportunities to testify and show forgiveness to the ones within this faith community. Finally, the third is the image of hybrid extended hands formed into the likeness of fully matured, seed-bearing wheat stalks. This final image concerns the grace we extend to those considered "outsiders" or "marginalized." It is an image that reminds us to practice hospitality, compassion, and evangelism as a mark of maturity to those in Christ.

These three images are intended to keep the worship structure "rooted" in foundational practices. The style of worship is contemporary and loose. The term "loose" is a representation of the posture of the congregation during Sunday worship. Although there is a lot of movement during worship, there are no verbal cues for standing or kneeling during songs, scripture reading, and prayer. Most of the time, the congregation stands and moves on its own without the guidance of the worship leader. There are calls

to the altar during congregational prayer times, but families are drawn there as a history of “open altars” has been established.

Upon entering through the doors of the church building, there is a welcome table with all types of activities and snacks for students. We inform parents of youth that we value students and children in our worship service. Coloring pages and bags of Legos act as liturgy and reflect the morning worship themes. Many newcomers find it odd and uncomfortable for their children to participate in worship service. There are images scrolling during announcements that reassure parents and caretakers of students our affirmation of their presence and participation. A photo of a child holding a Bible on the announcement screen with the text that states, “Parents make every effort to foster a child's mind to the life-giving Word and direct their feet to the sanctuary, no matter how noisy it may get. Let's make some noise!” Watonga Church of the Nazarene believes students must learn to worship alongside their caretakers and other generations. The model of segregated generational ministry lacks the depths needed to disciple and retain children in the faith. This philosophy of ministry hopes this practice will help inform Christian practices within the child’s home and broaden the influence of supporting mature adults.

An intentional attempt to gather all generations in one setting is believed to set the tone to have space and time for all to tell the story that God is writing through testimonies. This practice is represented during Celebrate Recovery services as well. Also, to help congregants remember and tell their story, the Eucharist is practiced regularly. Open altars and open share time as a means of grace to multiple generations to practice who we are and what we are becoming. Wrapping up their time together on a

Sunday morning with communion propels back into the mission statement to remind the congregation of the grace offered and the grace received with open hands. Before the benediction is offered, a reminder is spoken to the congregation of their role in extending grace. The exhorter states, “Someone you know needs to know the Jesus you know.”

Rural Church Culture Distinctives

There are libraries and a plethora of helpful information dedicated to the local church's ministry. Theological and ministry training within the seminary has primarily focused on the urban environment. One can easily find work in age and demographic-specific ministries such as youth, children, young adults, college, urban, pastoral care, discipleship, and administrative ministry, but what is rare are resources that look at ministry through the lens of rural ministry. When we categorize pastors according to their ministry setting, we ultimately signify that the ministry setting is “specialized.” The medical field, for example, has multiple branches that include general medicine, forensics, obstetrics, anesthesiology, pediatrics, cardiology, and neurology, to name a few. So much like the medical profession, there is a need for pastors to be trained in the rural setting. Therefore, because of the essence of the rural ministry, the rural pastor has a specialized experience within the rural culture. The rural ministry creates a uniqueness both in opportunities and challenges compared to its urbanized or city counterpart. Within that distinctive pastoral ministry setting, pastors quickly discover limitations in training and resources within the rural context. Isolation is a cultural norm within the rural context. We are discovering that pastors are leaving the full-time ministry in droves, which leaves the rural church struggling to fill that role even more dramatically.

In the church, the rural ministry is often considered a marginalized ministry[28]. It is regarded as a marginalized ministry because the smaller population density makes the varying economic, educational, and ethnic differences dramatically noticeable. The rural church is unique in its culture, which derives from its theology, social makeup, and philosophy compared to its urban counterpart. There is a misunderstanding of the culture that surrounds rural ministry. Like many cross-culture experiences, it can cause shock for people who are not cross-culturally trained or informed. What makes rural ministry so distinctive from other specialized ministries? The first few obvious observations that make the rural culture different are geography, population, economics, and education. Most rural communities have a population that is shrinking. If it is not on the decline, those communities are rapidly absorbed by nearby urban expansion. Therefore, the rural community is sparsely populated with fewer people with gifts, talents, energy, and ideas. With the shrinking population in the rural areas, the age demographic tends to be older than the demographics in more urban and suburban areas.[29] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile derive the rural population decline from the Great Depression. They state that during this time we see "the rural areas represented a push factor as the size of farms grew, crowding out small family farms, and a generation of young adults were also displaced that way, mostly to the suburbs. By the 1950s, the patterns were clearly

[28] The term "marginalized" in alignment with rural ministry is not meant to overshadow other typical marginalized subjects, but is considered marginalization nonetheless.

[29] "People and Homes Are Aging Quickly in Our Rural Communities," Urban Institute, (2016), https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-and-homes-are-aging-quickly-our-rural-communities.

evident: both city-neighborhood churches and rural churches were in decline, which is a crisis that continues to the present time."[30]

What drives church culture is "the way we do things around here." This mindset behind the majority of the rural church comes from "rugged individualism." That means a lot of what is accomplished within that community is from willpower and hard work. This can be both a strength and weakness within the rural church. A church culture that resides in the mindset that "we are going to do the very best with the resources we have" can provide limitless ministry opportunities when resources are limited. That competitive nature can motivate change when intentions are steered toward God's mission. But that mindset can also be unhealthy when it creates a church practice where man's wisdom supersedes God's wisdom, and ministry becomes centered around man's strength and resources.

When a diversity of age groups are represented in rural communities, it is usually a genealogical factor. Much of the rural community is agrarian. For farms to function, families rely upon other family members to be present to keep the operations afloat. That dynamic is reflected both in the membership and theology of the rural church. Generationally speaking, the church culture is handed down due to the number of family members represented within the rural body. Therefore, "change" is challenging to introduce amongst a long cataloged memory of tradition.

Theology is rooted in the images that the church bears. For example, the rural church that is heavily influenced by agriculture and has a high value on the family will be represented in the church liturgy. Being agriculturally centric, much of the illustrations

[30] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 171.

and liturgy are viewed through the lens of land and what it brings to life and the economy. When the people gather, a familiar prayer for rain might be heard. Bringing forth rain equates to the healing of the land. Many people fear that drought drives communities away to the urban populated areas. Being family-centric, the elements of worship, such as communion, hymns, and sermons, will center around the image of "the family of God."

It is not difficult to discover the power of politics influencing the rural church. The phrase "God, guns, and country" are political images that have infiltrated many of our rural churches. It would seem as if patriotism has become part of the liturgy of the rural church as American flags are displayed next to the Christian flag in most rural sanctuaries. An article in the Washington Post observes that most rural evangelicals identify as Republican in their political affiliation. In their interview with Ryan Burge, a political scientist, Burge says of the rural church voter, "Many people vote for the Republican because they have never heard that an evangelical can be a Democrat. The small-town evangelical church also reinforces a Republican culture informally through conversations in Sunday school classrooms or bumper stickers in the parking lot."[31] This political ideology stifles community engagement from the church. Ideologies tend to fuse the church practices with political formation and beliefs. For example, a church might engage in community development if it supports or defeats one political party.

Education is another distinctive trait within the rural context. Trade schools or high school diplomas are the most necessary formal education for jobs that drive rural

[31] Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Some Evangelicals Question Whether They Have Overlooked the Rural Church," *Washington Post*, (2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/12/15/some-evangelicals-question-whether-they-have-overlooked-the-rural-church/.

community economies. Secondary education is encouraged. Most citizens that are motivated by secondary education will find it challenging to find careers in rural communities that fit their degrees. Less education does not equate to less intelligence, but it does create a distinctive language and culture. The lower the education, the lower the language. Words become shallower in expressive conversation. When this culture bleeds into the church, there is an expectation of a particular vocabulary needed to communicate the truth.

Rural Church Challenges

Ministry in the rural context is an overlooked location to practice ministry. Unflattering words that practitioners describe rural areas are as follows: countryside, wilderness, wasteland, simple, ordinary, unimportant, backwoods, Mayberry, and Podunk, to name a few. Although these words were intended as a slight to communities in the rural areas, locals would consider those descriptive words as affirming. Life-long residents embrace rural living, and urbanization is highly resisted. Those locally invested are proud of their main streets, businesses, organizations, churches, and schools. But for the pastor, there is a progression of the vocational movement that begins in the rural setting in hopes of a chance to pastor in larger populated areas. When a pastor succeeds in a rural parish, they relocate to a larger parish.[32] This migration has created a clergy culture from that progression that places low regard on rural ministry.

Other than the vocational elitism that surrounds the opposing urban context, other factors contribute to the rural areas being overlooked. One is the misunderstanding of the

[32] Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural*, 97.

rural culture of vocational pastors. Rockwell C. Smith considers the rural culture vastly different from the urban one. It can create a culture shock for those that are cross-culturally unaware.[33] Traditional views of ministry lean towards mono-vocational models. The reality is that many rural congregations cannot support the salary of a full-time pastor. Many rural pastors are forced to seek financial support from outside the church office in which rural jobs are scarce. There is an increasing need for rural parishes to be open-minded and embrace the bi-vocational pastor. Bi-vocational stigmas within the church community create debilitating mindsets both from the pastor and congregants. These are just a few examples of why the clergy community declines to observe the rural churches.

Stanton claims two misunderstandings surrounding the rural context; therefore, most have written off the rural church. The first one is an over-emphasis or exaggeration of superior morality. He states, "This idealism leads to another faulty assumption: if rural communities are morally superior, then there is nothing that needs to be done to support them."[34] In other words, the rural community has been wrongly labeled as "Christianized." Secondly, Stanton identifies the reality of rural decay concerning education and economics. He states, "Rural communities are often described as white and poor. And yet, these assumptions often do injustice to the complexities of rural communities."[35] The rural reality is a breakdown in economics, social justice, and the traditional family.

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[33] Rockwell Carter Smith, *Rural Ministry and the Changing Community* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971). 126-127.

[34] Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural*, 9.

[35] Ibid. 13.

Donnie Griggs outlines three challenges that the rural church faces compared to the urban areas: theologically, socially, and philosophically. Theologically in regards to understanding the "call" to go and to value rural places.[36] Similarly to Stanton, Griggs speaks about the second point of the social aspects regarding rural decay. Both would agree that there is a misunderstanding that the rural context is already evangelized and that moral decay exists in urban areas. The statistics are overwhelming. A CBS.com report from The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University finds that "eighth-graders in rural areas were 70 percent likelier to have gotten drunk, and 29 percent likelier to drink alcohol. Among 10th-graders, use rates in rural areas exceeded those in large urban areas for every drug except marijuana and the methamphetamine known as ecstasy."[37] And the third challenge is the philosophical mindset against rural communities. Griggs writes, "Cities impact the small towns, cities have more people, I only have one life, and I want to make it really count."[38] In other words, if the cities are evangelized, then the small towns will follow suit. Therefore, rural efforts are secondary.

Urbanization is not a new term, and people in rural areas are overwhelmingly aware of its existence. Rockwell C. Smith had his work on rural ministry published in the late 1970s and addressed urbanization as a known trend.[39] In the rural context, there can be a constant revolving door of members moving to urban areas. Whole families can be

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[36] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 28.

[37] Genaro C Armas, "Rural Teen Drug Use Soars," CBS News (CBS Interactive, January 26, 2000), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rural-teen-drug-use-soars/.

[38]Griggs, *Small Town Jesus,* 77-82.

[39] Smith, *Rural Ministry and the Changing Community*, 185.

quickly uprooted or transplanted due to the economic rollercoaster the rural industries create. Other factors that contribute to rural exodus vary from economic to social.

Therefore, the rural church grapples with the risk of relational investments. The "church work" without membership gain can quickly become the rudder that steers the ship. For example, the emotional risk is high when a senior graduates from the local high school and has no intention to return. Many members that have planted deep roots in the rural communities usually keep newcomers at arm's length. The return on relational investment usually is turned inwardly. This is where the highest form of investment comes from the highest chances of local membership retention. This is not just a rural issue. As stated before, the Western church culture is diagnosed with a preoccupation with statistics and growth. As long as this preoccupation exists, there will not be a healthy way for the local congregation to measure significant ministry.

Within the twentieth century, it has become obvious that the Western world has shifted into living in a post-Christian culture. Mark Sayers identifies four identifying markers that stuffed out the Church's influence in this cultural shift of "post-Christian." He writes, "This concept could be described as a street-level myth of secularism, founded on the belief that as we progress in time, we will also advance scientifically, technologically, politically, and morally."[40] In other words, Sayers is claiming that the Western world no longer looks at life through a Christian-worldview. He calls this a "myth of secularism" because secularism rarely has been analyzed. Secularism is only an idea.

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[40] Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church: The Hope for Renewal in the Rise of Our Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 20.

But when *Faith in the Countryside* was published in 1990 by the Archbishop's Commission on Rural Areas, they stated, "In rural areas, it is often wise to avoid too clear a distinction between the Christian life as lived in the Church and the Christian life as lived in society."[41] In certain rural communities, it is observed that the Christian identity that is assumed with rural life is unwarranted. But in some cases, the rural church culture has tendencies to blur the lines between community and church.[42] In other words, the rural church has a tendency to believe that the society's life is highly influenced by Christedom. This evidence gives a distinction of the rural church being hesitant to embrace a "post-Christian" society. This results in a church culture that is also resistant to adaptation.

The denial of the "post-Christian" society creates a utopian mindset that is rear-facing. This means building strong worship and discipleship attendance is as simple as opening the doors of the worship center. There was a nursery rhyme that combined words and actions using hands. The rhyme would start with the hands clasped together, fingers crossed and tucked inside the hands, and two index fingers pointed up. "Here's the church and here is the steeple." Then the actions would flip the hands over to reveal wiggling fingers representing people inside. "Open the doors and see all the people." There might have been a history of congregational strength during the age of Christendom with little community engagement or outreach. The rural church in denial of a "post-Christian" society will be left wondering, "Where are all the people?"

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[41] *Faith in the Countryside: A Report Presented to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York* (Worthing, England: Churchman Publishing, 1990), 243

[42] Jason Cook, *Old Time Religion: Healthy Churches In Rural Places* (Published independently by Rural Church Voices, 2021), 45.

To add to the challenges, rural congregations are facing rapid change within their context. The rapid change has accelerated in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Long before the recent pandemic, the rural church started to feel the effects of technology on its community. Their local assessment of the cultural shift in their surrounding communities was due to increased industrial technology. In the 1970s, Smith stated, "I am persuaded that we are experiencing, not changes, but symptoms of a fundamental reorientation of our culture."[43] Today, the rural church now has to look at ministry through a pandemic lens and find ways to respond. In March 2020, many rural pastors were embarking on uncharted territories as they stared at a camera in an empty sanctuary to deliver their Sunday morning message. The church's presence on social media unlocked great potential for innovative evangelism. Kay Kotan comments that the pandemic created an opportunity born out of the crisis. She says, "Congregations learned there are more ways to offer worship than we had previously imagined."[44] It also opened grave consequences for pastors that feel the strain to balance ministry in-person and online effectively. Tom Rainer observes the digital ministry and post-pandemic effect on churches. He says,

> The biggest problem with the "back to normal" approach is that the world has changed significantly. The pre-quarantine world and post-quarantine world are not the same. Churches cannot minister effectively using methods for a world that no longer exists.[45]

Within these dramatically shifting tides of culture are the waters that the rural church is attempting to navigate.

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[43] Smith, *Rural Ministry and the Changing Community*, 17.

[44] Kay Kotan, *Being the Church in a Post-Pandemic World: Game Changers for the Post-Pandemic Church* (Knoxville, TN: Market Square Publishing, 2021), 17.

[45] Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Springs, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2020), 37.

Rural Church Health

There are practices within the rural life of the church that serve as signposts of health and validity. The health of a local church will hinge upon how the leadership and its people "spend" their social and spiritual capital. Pastoral leadership is fundamentally important. Kent R. Hunter writes, "They can either provide strength and focus for a positive future, or they can be the bottleneck of progress."[46] Smith argues that the most valuable social capital is spent on knowing how to do the job of a pastor. When the pastor is competent in their vocation, then they gain the respect of the laymen to accept the advice given in the public arena.[47]

In the rural context, the congregationalist would assume a short tenure of any pastor, as previously stated. Therefore, relational capital for the pastor will need to be built to be fully effective. Kent R. Hunter published his book in 1993 and understood the normality of the "suitcase" pastor in the rural setting. He says:

> The problem with short pastoral tenures is cyclical… With few resources, pastors are easily frustrated and are subtly told that this is not as important a ministry as somewhere else. So they move on quickly to another type of congregation, reinforcing the denomination's, seminary's, and publishing company's limited priority for the rural church.[48]

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[46] Kent R. Hunter, *The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church: A New Look at Ministry in the Agri-Culture* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1993), 88.

[47] Smith, *Rural Ministry and the Changing Community*, 154.

[48] Hunter, T*he Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church*, 100.

He submits that a pastor and a congregation committed to longevity break the cycle and build the capital needed for a pastor to succeed in the rural context.

Another feature of building social capital for the pastor is giving their attention to adequately understand the rural culture and read the congregation. Characteristics of the rural church are not universal or cookie-cutter. Sally Gaze reports, "Listening and seeking to understand a context is only a first step in becoming a mission-shaped church… It is important consciously to take a step back from the things we take for granted to do a third form of listening−listening to God to discern how mission and church should develop in response to the particular cultural context."[49] A few good questions that the pastor can ask are: "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 the economy?"[50]

Actively pursuing the knowledge of the culture and people in the context the pastor is preaching to activate the best form of communication. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale claims that the result is threefold when a pastor overlooks culture in exegeting scripture. One, the sermon becomes generic and not specific to humanity. Two, it paints over-simplistic generalities of the congregation. And three, the pastor projects biases, concerns, and issues onto the assembly.[51] Jeff Astley proposes that ordinary theology is simply "theological listening." What is meant by this, particularly in the rural context of

[49] Sally Gaze and Graham James, *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011), 24-25.

[50] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus,* 99.

[51] Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997). 23.

"ordinary theology,"[52] is "an ability and willingness to listen out for, and to acknowledge, the theological content that resides below the surface of the often inarticulate, hesitant and confused, but also deeply-felt reflections of those who have never been trained to express their theology any differently."[53] Therefore, the theology that is birthed out of the rural context needs to be carefully considered by the leadership of the pulpit and clergy. Misuse of this authority results in a theology that is heavily culturally driven. Van Gelder and Zscheile state, "Reflecting on what the Spirit of God might be up to with respect to these cultural transformations involves deep, reflective discernment by the church. That is crucial if the church wants to be able to sort through what to let go of from its past while courageously engaging the future that is emerging."[54]

When we discuss "ordinary theology," it is not meant to demean the theology within the rural church. It is important to understand the rural church's theology and its origins. There is an undergirding of culture that drives its theology. Many can say that the "ordinary theology" prevailing in rural contexts is that most of its members have less education. It must be repeated that less education does not equate to less intelligence. But the expectation of trained or highly educated clergy is far less. Many would assume that the higher the educated or trained pastor, the higher the language within sermons and Bible studies. A sense of inferiority is felt towards the pulpit ministry when the minister cannot translate solidarity through language with the rural parishioners. If it is expected

[52] Ordinary theology is a term that is synonymous with rural theology. Ordinary is the term used for people not professionally trained to study God. Scholars believe that within the rural context is where ordinary theology can be appropriately observed and discerned.

[53] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*. (Dublin: Veritas Publishing, 2014). 50.

[54] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission,* 254.

for pastoral leadership to navigate through theological issues, even ordinary issues, it should be expected for the pastor to engage in continual education. A healthy church values higher education within its clergy.

The criticism of "ordinary theology" comes when incomprehensible mysteries are avoided for the sake of simplicity. "Ordinary theology," when done well, should not avoid theological reflection. Theological questioning is the process of doing theology well. God can be known and revealed. The term "ordinary" evokes excuses for circumventing intellectual thinking. But the term "theology" is the task of thinking through God's disclosure to us. Although God has chosen to make Himself known to us, this does not necessarily imply that we will fully comprehend all that God is. If clergy is unable to think critically through theological issues, it will be difficult to lead a congregation to significant forms of ministry. The product of doing theology through the lens of tradition only creates an agreeable church culture that is not challenged beyond its own echo chambers. It is the iceberg analogy where theology is what supports the exposed mission of God.

Leadership is not the only factor in healthy rural churches; it is also the strength of discipleship within the laity. A healthy rural church has created a sub-community within the planted towns. The sub-community or culture is called disciples. Will Basham writes, "The rural church is uniquely positioned and equipped to train faithful men who can train other faithful men."[55] Deep-rooted relationships are needed between brothers and sisters where Jesus is at the center of their lives. Basham continues, "Developing a

[55] Will Basham, *Rural Mission: Insights from a Rural Church Planter* (Independently Published, 2021), 97.

culture of these kinds of relationships will create for our culture one of the richest feelings of community and belonging in the gospel family."[56] Although the culture created within the church hinges upon leadership, it is not done in isolation. The collective is what makes the majority of culture. One thing that the rural church faces is a decline in the family units. If the rural church adapts to this social problem, they become surrogates to many from broken and damaged homes.

Finally, the strength of a rural church can be measured by its influence and partnerships within its community. This is also known as "asset-based ministry" or "asset-based strategies." This is a strategy-based ministry where the view of the local congregation's location and purpose is only a portion of what God is doing through the congregation. They are connected with a greater network of organizations or assets to meet the community's needs. It is a means of evangelism where the church is not the sole proprietor of community development but discovers its role in creating meaningful change in the community. The local congregation must affirm and partner with other community organizations to represent critical components for successful revitalization. In their book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, John Kretzmann and John McKnight identify five categories of assets in communities. They write, "The skills and talents of local people; the web of local voluntary associations; the strengths of local institutions−public, private, and nonprofit; the available land and physical property; and the local economy."[57]

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[56] Ibid., 64.

[57] John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, 1st edition (Vancoover, B.C.: ACTA Publications, 1993).

Asset-based ministry is relationally driven between the local congregation and existing entities within the community. There are tangible expressions of asset-based ministry in the rural context. Many rural communities have vacant homes and sometimes are purchased and owned by one or a few individuals. Rural churches at one time may have had the means to hire pastoral staff and provide a parsonage, but that home is no longer needed due to staff positions being vacated. Those vacant homes can be an asset used to provide sober-living environments for men and women. They can be transformed into food and clothes pantries. Church vans can be an asset in providing affordable transportation for basic needs. Worship spaces and fellowship halls can be used for community activities that promote health and unity. These possibilities are a few examples that allow the local congregations to focus on what they can do well without getting overwhelmed with the multi-dimensional structures needed for a dynamic community.

As stated before, the church has confessed that we live in a post-Christian world. Within the post-Christian context, it can be overwhelming for the local church to try and engage ministry in the days of old. This is why we need the church to be activated within the public arena by sending missionaries into workspaces, political arenas, and works of community service. Instead of overwhelming churches with the idea of engaging in community development, empower them to live into their capacity to bring about significant change in their respective neighborhoods.[58] The rural church can become this partner and leader for their community and county by articulating a hopeful vision. When

[58] Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural,* 54.

the church is vital in theology and leadership, it can impact the broader community outside its denomination.

CHAPTER 2

RURAL PASTOR

It is no secret that the vocational demands of a pastor are heavy in each specialized ministry. The cultural differences of the rural church make those demands within that setting also unique. The expectation of the rural congregation upon its pastor is significantly distinctive. There are specific factors that contribute to the decline of pastors being placed in rural settings, but there is a need for holistic support for the rural pastor. Spiritual, physical, mental, and familial support are most negligent within the pastoral practices in the rural pastor's life. Where the lack of interest in pastoral placement within the rural context causes a problem within the church, the lack of resources and pastoral collaboration causes problems for the rural pastor.

But what is shared about the rural church's culture is also found in other specialized ministries is its expectation and relationship with the pastor. G. Lloyd Rediger paints an accurate snapshot of a congregation's expectations of a pastor. He writes:

> Be a good preacher−preach the Word, but don't make us uncomfortable. Be a good teacher−teach us and our children what we want to learn. Be there when we need you−crisis, death, special events. Don't do things that embarrass us. Be a CEO, a therapist, a computer specialist, a community

> leader, a negotiator, a problem-solver, a fund-raiser, and keep our church looking nice and operating well.[59]

A majority of westernized pastors relate to this descriptor regardless of specialization. It would seem that these expectations are magnified due to the high percentage of single-staffed churches in the rural context. The success of a pastor, as defined by the culture of the body of believers in the rural church, is based upon the pastor's "ability" to manage the many facets of ministry. It is expected that the pastor is an expert in all fields.

Rural Pastoral Stressors

Much of what characterizes the rural church culture is also connected to the stresses related to the ministry vocation. There is liberation in just naming the pain or stressors related to any job or vocation. Many pastors have yielded themselves to 1 Corinthians 9:19b which states, "I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." To become all things to all people has become the job description of the rural pastor. The expectations of the rural congregation can be unrealistic at times.[60] Just the categories of being the church administrator, shepherd of the flock, and faithful to the Word limit availability to personal devotion to faith and family. But the statistics that reflect the rate of ministry resignations and burnout are alarming. The Barna Group conducted a research study of Protestant pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry within the year 2021. The results showed that 38 percent of full-time Protestant pastors considered quitting. The research states, "More recently, October 2021 data

[59] G. Lloyd Rediger, *Fit to Be a Pastor: A Call to Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Fitness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 19.

[60] Dennis Bickers, *The Healthy Pastor: Easing the Pressures of Ministry* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2010), 38.

shows that many pastors are not faring well in multiple categories of well-being, including spiritual, physical, emotional, vocations and financial."[61]

There is a humorous story about a pastor giving a state of the church report to his leadership team. He summarized his feelings by stating, "I would love this church if it weren't for the people." If pastors recall the motivating pull to full-time ministry, relationships were the driving force. Relationships are gospel centric. Therefore, if a pastor does not have a good relationship with God, congregation, and family, life quickly becomes lifeless. Jennie Clarkson identifies five relevant challenges the clergy faces: criticism, conflict, unrealistic and conflicting expectations, resistance to change, and stress. These five categories are synonymous with any leadership type. But without a healthy balance of managing those categories, Clarkson proposes that physical health, emotional energy, and pastoral effectiveness are at risk.[62]

Rural churches are separated by great distance from other communities and other pastors, which can present stressors and challenges for ministry leaders. Specifically, in the rural context, many pastors claim that this isolation the rural context creates for mentorship, authentic friendship, and confidants. Being alone and isolated is one of the top four reasons clergy identified for leaving the ministry. On top of that, isolation and loneliness can create devastating outcomes of sexual addictions and misconduct.[63] As the age of the rural congregation is older, there are tendencies for the body to be less social.

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[61] "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," Barna Group (2021), https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/.

[62] Jeannie Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019). 29-31.

[63] Bickers, *The Healthy Pastor*, 79.

In other words, the circle of friendship is closed. The majority have close friends and relatives they love and care for but do not necessarily travel outside of that circle. For the mission-oriented pastor, this creates a difficult evangelism and discipleship environment.

The demands upon a pastor take their toll on the clergy's home. There is a low financial expectation that surrounds the rural pastorate. It might appear that even larger churches have a healthy salary package for ministers. Reports indicate that over half of clergy are at the bottom of the pay scale.[64] A church that has a tendency to be building-centric has expectations that activities should be planned in the church building every day of the week. Many families of pastors feel they get whatever time is leftover if there is any leftover time.

Another area of stress is manifested in the realm of time management. This realm or topic needs a careful evaluation of its origin. Although the expectations of the vocational ministry are exhaustive, there can be other underlying personal issues that create an abuse or misuse of time. Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr allude to pastoral complexes. They state that the physiology of clergy has a hero complex that attempts to fix others, strive for status in the community, and concentrate efforts and address other people's problems. The heroine puts in a lot of overtime, forgoes holidays, or if on one, becomes bored and restless. The hero is well-trained to flee from any loneliness or emptiness that may surface while they are not working; it is preferable to carry on with their current tasks.[65]

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[64] Ibid., 22

[65] Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: A New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self, and Others* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 9.

Healthy Rural Pastoral Practices

Within all contexts, it is important to develop intentional practices to withstand the pressures of leading a community of faith. The best pastoral care practices are not how to care for and shepherd the flock but how well it is with the soul of the under-shepherd. Gregory the Great stressed the importance of self-care for a pastor:

> In restoring others to health by healing their wounds, he must not disregard his own health… Let him not, while helping his neighbors, neglect himself, let him not, while lifting up others, fall himself. In many instances, indeed, the greatness of some men's virtues has been an occasion of their perdition, in that they have felt inordinately secure in the assurance of their strength, and they died suddenly because of their negligence.[66]

Although there are many practices or means of grace that clergy should be dedicated to leading well, there are a few in the rural context that should be prioritized to be part of the rural solution.

Not all stress is harmful. It should not be the goal for pastors to live "stress-free." Life is always filled with tension and gives room for growth. Sometimes the root cause of stress in the life of a pastor is the lack of being "in tune." For the clergy, an intimate relationship with Jesus is non-negotiable. If spiritual intimacy with the Lord is neglected, clergy are a danger to the church, family, and self. Lance Witt writes:

> We have neglected the fact that a pastor's greatest leadership tool is a healthy soul. Our concentration on skill and technique and strategy has resulted in deemphasizing interior life. An outcome is an increasing

[66] Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, in Ancient Christian Writers Series, vol. 11.4 (New York: Paulist Press, 1954), 234.

> number of men and women leading our churches who are emotionally empty and spiritually dry.[67]

Luke 10:27 declares that Jesus says, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" As we look at all the responsibilities expected of a pastor, there are some practical steps that men and women in pastoral positions can take to safeguard against the spirit, soul, and body burnout. Let us frame this conversation under the prime motivation of loving God and loving our neighbor.

In life, we will not be able to avoid conflict. Being a faithful steward of the Word does not automatically translate into healthy reactions and relationships with the congregation. Dennis Bickers states, "The first thing a minister must do is to stop thinking of conflict as a bad thing."[68] There is an act of submission to one another that requires a level of emotional intelligence (EQ). Many publications and works are being submitted in the world of relational and emotional intelligence that can help pastors. Increasing a pastor's emotional quotient sounds like addressing cognitive adolescent development. But instead, EQ is the ability to understand and manage emotions that can reduce stress, increase empathy, communicate effectively, and defuse conflict. Authors like Roy Oswald, Arland Jacobson, Peter Scazzero, and Jeannie Clarkson have identified emotional intelligence as a conscious way to help ministers and churches through crises and build social capital.

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[67] Lance Witt, *Replenish: Leading from a Healthy Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 19.

[68] Bickers, *The Healthy Pastor*, 88.

Oswald and Jacobson state, "EQ skills are central to the development of trust within a congregation. Emotional intelligence involves a set of competencies that are not taught in seminary but that are central to pastoral effectiveness."[69] We would assume that EQ is a genetic or developmental trait. Either a person has a high level of EQ, or they do not. There are ways to raise a pastor's EQ: clinical pastoral education, psychotherapy, clergy support groups, emotional intelligence worship, spiritual disciplines, working with EQ specialists, personality surveys to increase self-awareness, diversity training, and anger management workshops.[70]

On top of a need for pastors to increase their EQ to understand and manage emotions that can reduce stress, increase empathy, communicate effectively, and defuse conflict, there is also relational intelligence (RI) that can be increased to deepen pastor and congregation relations. As mentioned above, it is not a priority to eliminate stress. Any relationship worth having takes work. Pastors should maintain the position that work does not equal unhealthy stress. Relationships define what it means to be human and give proof of God.[71] Love is the overarching and unifying theme of the biblical story of humanity in relationship with God. Pastor relational intelligence deals more with the investment it takes to build social capital within the congregation and broader community.

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[69] Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 119.

[70] Ibid., 130-136.

[71] Dharius Daniels, *Relational Intelligence: The People Skills You Need for the Life of Purpose You Want* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 11, 17.

Dharius Daniels defines RI as "the ability to learn, understand, and comprehend knowledge as it relates to interpersonal dynamics."[72] Much of what it takes for a pastor to increase their EQ and RI is to increase self-awareness, but also understand that the temptation of exploring self-awareness is loving ourselves too much and others too little. There are six defining roles of people with high RI: "story collector, energy carrier, compelling relator, conversational futurist, likable hero, and disproportionate investor."[73] The challenge in RI is making sure that the pursuit of increasing relational capital does not create a dysfunction that interpersonal relationships morph into codependency. Ronald W. Richardson illuminates that disconnect by "differentiation of self." Richardson states that differentiation "requires the ability to be aware of the difference between functioning on an emotional basis, where we are deeply connected to those in the emotional system around us, and functions on an intellectual basis, where we are able to use our rationality to do our own more objective thinking."[74]

As stated above, an intimate relationship with Jesus is non-negotiable. Pastors that are facing a deficit in their discipleship or spiritual walk are often dealing with the parallels between psychological and emotional healing. Those parallels that are uncovered will result in moral and spiritual failure. Donald Hands and Wayne Fehr believe that clergy should work a twelve-step program as part of their discipleship regimen. The twelve steps have been synonymous with Alcoholics Anonymous, but the twelve steps are a tool to uncover or reveal what is already present. The twelve steps are

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[72] Ibid., 20.

[73] Ibid., 55-186.

[74] Ronald Wayne Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 56-57.

practiced in a very public setting. Therefore clergy must be intentional in moving out of a place of isolation and finding a safe place of solidarity with those who understand and care. Hand and Fehr say, "In the community of recovering persons, the individual can come to admit the full extent of his or her unmanageable behavior and powerlessness (Step One), come to believe that a Higher Power can restore him or her to sanity (Step Two), and entrust his or her will and life utterly to the care of God (Step Three).[75]

Second Chronicles 7:14 says, "If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." To be faithful in the matters of the pastorate, the pastor has to be faithful in prayer, not only in times of turbulence but in all matters of life and in all situations. Prayer is the marriage vow expressed between disciples and God. Dedrick Bonhoeffer states, "In times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of failure and in times of triumph" we will pray. Bonhoeffer continues by placing heavy emphasis on the practice of prayer within the clergy. He writes:

> Morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptations to which we succumb, weaknesses and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation with other [people], all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer. Order and distribution of your time become more firm where they originate in prayer. Temptations which accompany the working day will be conquered on the basis of the morning breakthrough with God. Decisions demanded by work become easier and simpler where they are made not in fear of [people] but only in the sight of God. "Whatever your task, work, heartily, as serving the Lord and not [people]" (Colossians 3:23). Even mechanical work is done in a more patient way if it arises from the recognition of God and his command. The powers to work take hold, therefore, at the place

[75] Hands, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy,* 20-25.

> where we have prayed to God. He wants to give us today the power which we need for our work.[76]

The practice of prayer is a practice of dependence, Sabbath, self-denial, and peace (*Shalom*). Scazzero states that prayer is the practice that "helps us stop!"[77] Stopping for God denies us our way and allows God to direct our paths. The practice of prayer is not simply for a pastor to be a better pastor, but rather for a pastor to be whole.

A partial claim to being whole is being in step with the rhythms of God and creation through Sabbath. Sabbath has been part of the cadence of creation since its God-ordained conception: work, work, work, work, work, work, rest. God created a rhythm of rest for all of creation so that there could be a systematic pulse that leaned in the direction of life. Jesus makes it very clear that the practice of the Sabbath was a means of grace for mankind. Jesus says in Mark 2:27b, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." But rather, we run a similar risk that the Pharisees risked when we look at the Sabbath as a law rather than a gift. Some are tempted to interpret Sabbath as a law that has been fulfilled through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is more deeply understood through the person of Jesus being the Lord of the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-6, Mk 2:23-28, Lk 6:1-5).

For the clergy, if Sabbath is not part of the weekly rhythms of the office, then the temptation is to place more upon our shoulders than God expects us to bear. It is within a rhythm of rest that we trust that God's ways are higher and better than our own. The workload that clergy place upon themselves usually equates to well over 40 hours per

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[76] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

[77] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life In Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 56.

week. With funerals, community events, weddings, and other church involvements, it would be easy for a pastor to arrive at the end of a week without at least taking a day off. Sabbath keeping is not simply a "day off," but rather an intentional practice of "being." Being with God. Scazzero lays out four principles within Sabbath observing: "stopping, resting, delighting, contemplating."[78] It is believed that pastors are requesting more Sabbaticals from their daily office routine because of the lack of rhythm of Sabbath. Sabbaticals are a result of a lack of Sabbaths with compounded interest. It is vital to the health of a pastor to observe the rhythms of Sabbath, not only for themself but as a witness that God, not pastors, preserves the church. It is not through man's efforts that the Spirit animates and sustains the church.

In the Church of the Nazarene, a heavy emphasis is placed on higher education. It is the denomination's position that ensuring everyone's access to higher education will only enrich the church into spiritual maturity. It works in tandem with a sending God and a sending church. The CTN believes its mission is to make Christ-like disciples of the nations. How the CTN believes it carries that mission is by sending educated, loving, servant believers into the world. According to the Higher Education Manual:

> Education in the Church of the Nazarene, rooted in the biblical and theological commitments of the Wesleyan and holiness movements and accountable to the stated mission of the denomination, aims to guide those who look to it in accepting, in nurturing, and in expressing in service to the church and world consistent and coherent Christian understandings of social and individual life. Additionally, such institutions of higher education will seek to provide a curriculum, quality or instruction, and evidence of scholastic achievement that will adequately prepare graduates

[78] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality,* 153-160.

> to function effectively in vocations and professions such graduates may choose.[79]

The lack of education, or at the very least, the lack of access to higher education is a systematic problem our world faces. One detrimental factor in pastoral leadership in rural places is the lack of education. Only 60 percent of newly ordained elders of the Church of the Nazarene have formal education from Nazarene institutions.[80] If we expect our clergy to be able to adequately cast vision from a sound doctrinal space, then continual higher education should be expected. Solid, formal, theological education helps pastoral vision stay doctrinally grounded. Higher education also contributes to continual fellowship with others that are professional clergy.

Trained clergy need to understand their context. Pastors will always feel the tension in navigating between the gospel and culture. In rural culture, although the language might be the same dialect, education sometimes creates a language barrier. Pastors in any ecclesial context will have to navigate the tensions between different levels of education, emotional intelligence, and spiritual maturity. It is a skill that a rural pastor will need to develop as part of the incarnational ministry. This means that even educated pastors that have the ability to speak at a certain language level will need to understand how to effectively communicate the gospel on a local language level. Both theology and rural communities have their own distinctive vocabulary. The role of the rural missionary or pastor will be to creatively collide and collaborate these two distinctiveness.

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[79] Church of the Nazarene, "Higher Education" *Manual, 2017–2021*, https://2017.manual.nazarene.org/section/higher-education/. 400.1.

[80] Crow, *The Corps of Pastors in the USA/Canada Region Church of the Nazarene*, 9.

The last practice we will touch upon for a healthier pastor is physical fitness. Those parallels mentioned in the previous paragraphs imply that we cannot compartmentalize our health. A majority of Americans are overweight and have unhealthy lifestyles. Much like EQ and RI, physical health always begins with self-awareness. Rediger outlines the "ABCs" of bodily fitness: "(A) Awareness: Simplicity, attitude, body-mind-spirit fitness are potent motivations. (B) Basics: Eat smart; eat less; eat nutritious food; hydrate. (C) Congruency: Nutrition is an interrelationship of nourishing resources." He then concludes that exercise is the final movement in bodily fitness.[81]

Rural Pastor/Congregation Relationship

The main contributions of a healthy church come from leadership. The health of the relationship of a local church will largely hinge upon how the leadership builds their relational and spiritual capital. All would agree that pastoral leadership is fundamentally important. When the pastor is competent in their vocation, then they gain the respect of the laymen to accept the advice given in the public arena. But not all aspects of healthy relationships within the church hinge upon the pastor's leadership. A leader can only truly lead those who would be willing to follow.

Many who work in the field of holistic health of clergy would agree that a congregation that is consciously aware of the pastor's health increases the overall relationship of the pastor to the congregation and vice versa. David Keck uses a great

[81] Rediger, *Fit to Be a Pastor*, 82.

symbolic, theological image of "covenant" to embody a good healthy pastor/congregation relationship. He states:

> In a covenant, the two parties are deeply concerned about the welfare of each other. There is trust and shared goals, a common purpose. The goods and services provided are important−but they are only part of the relationship. Healthy churches have covenants with their pastors, not contracts. Mutual regard for the other's welfare, not mutual self-interest, is the basis for this relationship. Each side commits to be faithful to the other and to hold each other accountable in love as together they seek to fulfill their common purpose.[82]

The establishment of a covenant is not understood from a worldly perspective. Covenants between pastor and congregation set forth a biblical model established by God throughout the Genesis narrative. Covenants can create more united and purposeful expectations congregations have with their pastor and less cynicism from the pastor to the congregation. Keck writes, "All pastors need help from their congregations. Stress is inevitable, but in a healthy congregation, it can become *eustress*.[83] Covenantal help with both accountability and setting boundaries is also essential. One of the greatest gifts a congregation and pastor can give each other is mutually agreed-upon expectations."[84]

One example of a healthy covenantal agreement a congregation can have with their pastor is being their prayer team. It is difficult to have a cynical view of someone you pray for on a consistent basis. But the absence of cynicism towards the pastor is not the goal. God calls us to the ministry of reconciliation, and the power of prayer has a tremendous history of being a change agent within the local church. It is unfortunate that

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[82] David A. Keck, *Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors: Covenant Expectations for Thriving Together* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 19.

[83] Ibid. *Eustress* literally means "good stress." It was coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye, reminds us not only that tension is inevitable but also that it is a potential source for good.

[84] Ibid., 43.

prayer has to be addressed as a fundamental solution for a healthy church. Prayer should be a priority. Just like a pastor that does not pray, a church that does not pray is dependent upon its own solutions and programs. A church that prays is dependent upon the wisdom, power, and intervention of God.

As mentioned above, pastors can increase their relational capital by building their emotional intelligence. Congregations can covenant to increase their emotional and relational intelligence as well. Congregants can commit themselves individually to the hard work of increasing EQ in the ways listed above in the "Healthy Rural Pastor Practices" section of this chapter. A congregation can work collectively to increase their level of EQ. According to Oswald and Jacobson, there are six characteristics of an emotionally intelligent congregation:

> Keep the three components of congregational life alive and healthy—climate, theology, and vision; develops an immune system that enables church leaders and members to intervene when toxic interchanges threaten to disrupt a positive community experience; ensures that congregational norm—the unconscious, unwritten rules about the way people are to behave—are made conscious and possible altered to remain positive and relationship enhancing; expects decision-making or study groups to engage in some type of team building before they begin their work and to conclude with some type of evaluation of group process before people leave; sponsor small-group ministries where people can connect in meaningful ways, and ensures that members and constituents receive prompt and effective pastoral care.[85]

Congregations can covenant to build self-awareness by studying congregational roles to support the pastor. Financial packages that congregations offer to pastors can be demeaning and discouraging. The financial covenant the congregation can offer to the pastor that can reduce stress is to become more responsible in their support of the salaries

[85] Oswald and Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus*, 105..

of pastors. Even a healthier understanding of bi-vocational ministry can eliminate financial stigmas and stressors. This can occur when a covenantal congregation no longer views their role as dictators of time but rather as partners in ministry. Bickers challenges churches in hiring ministers to have realistic expectations when offering salaries. He writes, "Responsible churches need to look at their current situation and determine if they can afford to pay fair salaries to their ministers or if they need to look at alternative plans. Irresponsible churches will continue to expect to find persons willing to serve at such low salaries that their families suffer."[86]

As stated before, the strong rural congregations have established a sub-community called "disciples." Rural congregations that place Jesus at the heart of their life must develop strong bonds with each other. This fosters the finest sense of belonging and community within the gospel family. Although leadership is the most crucial aspect in shaping the culture of the church, it should be done in partnership with the members at large. Scazzero warns that congregations, although zealous in their faith, will mistake their zeal for discipleship.[87] Congregations that are intentional in their love for God and love for their neighbor will result in pursuing higher emotional and relational intelligence.

Rural Pastor Conclusion

Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,

[86] Bickers, *The Healthy Pastor*, 25.

[87] Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). 37-39.

and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." The pressures and unhealthy stresses that are associated with vocational ministry can easily manifest destruction within the life of a pastor. It is important for those who lead us and shepherd us need to be vigilant in being whole by the author and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2) This is also a call for the pastor to be self-aware of the things that can easily "hinder" or "entangle" us in the destruction. Many of the stressors listed, if not uncovered and managed, will lead to sinful behaviors and devastating results in other areas of life.

Although much needs to be done to support rural pastors in holistic health, identifying and addressing every pastoral stressor is far too exhaustive for this work. Still, there is liberation in just naming the pain or stressors related to pastoral ministry. Although the rural context creates uniqueness in opportunities and challenges compared to other specific ministries, a majority of the practices a pastor should implement are universal regardless of their specificity. Love is the overarching and unifying theme of the biblical story of humanity in relationship with God. Love is also the motivating factor in faith and vocational ministry. Love should be the driving force for ministers to increase their emotional and relational intelligence and spiritual well-being. The partnership through covenants between congregation and pastor can create more united, purposeful, and healthy communities of faith and parishioner families.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

RURAL THEOLOGY

Up to this point, we have explored some cultural markers of the rural church. These cultural markers will have an effect on how it does theology. The rural cultural implications upon the church create unhealthy labels of particular theological emphasis. Rural church culture has a tendency to group theological thoughts into areas such as: progressive, evangelical, liberal, and conservative. These categories are intended to identify and define theological lenses that deflect constructive discussions within the rural church. Whenever the church is biased against those that do theology differently, the church cannot find common ground with people that are created to be unified by the Spirit of God (Eph 4:1-6). Is there a theology that the rural church can embrace that speaks to the ordinary person and unifies the church?

One would assume that the answer to "Who is God?" would be universal, and the study of God is a timeless truth irrelevant to culture. Yet our contributing authors would state that the process of that discovery hinges upon context. This is where we come to understand that teachings from the Bible need to be interpreted from the context of culture, called "contextual theology." For example, In Benjamin Valentine's work on Latino theology in the United States, he observes that (liberation theology), "It is a

cultural theology, not only by virtue of the fact that as theology it is always necessarily a product of culture."[88] Contextual theology is a theological system that considers not only culture but also socio-political, ideological, and historical factors.

Michael W. Goheen writes on the theological reflection of Lesslie Newbigin and discovers that most of his reflections about God were occupied in "occasional and contextual, shaped by the burning issues and needs of the day. His theology was a dialogue between scripture and the urgent concerns of the church."[89] This sheds light on the important factor in the method of cultural theology where certain dangers may linger in accommodating culture over the truth of scripture. Lesslie Newbigin and Eugene Peterson believe that the study of God in contextual theology has to be rooted in scripture.

Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo write about the Evangelical Theological Society and the Institute for Biblical Research that gathered eight theologians to form a snapshot of the global church. They write from eight global perspectives, but affirm the discourse of contextual theologians, saying,

> "These biblical scholars and theologians affirm that they cannot develop a doctrine of the church without reference to the context in which the church lives out its faith in service to Christ. If indeed all theology is contextual, each biblical scholar and theologian must be a deep and thoughtful reader of the biblical text, the church's theological traditions, and cultural context in which the church defines its being and mission."[90]

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[88] Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 44.

[89] Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 12.

[90] Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2018), 13.

Therefore, there is a unique cultural lens in which theology is done in a rural community called "rural theology." It is a contextual theology that considers multiple cultural factors that inform the church and its believers about God.

We have discussed another term that is used for the untrained study of God in a rural context called "ordinary theology." This term limits the rural church simply to educational factors. It is proposed that it is the desire of the Church of the Nazarene to have clergymen and women be educationally equipped for their ministry tasks. Theology should not be done in isolation or surface interpretation. The desire is to have theological coherence. In the Wesleyan tradition, we believe that the holy scriptures are foundational and vital in forming our identity in Christ. We believe in practicing Christian tradition; therefore, we value the teaching of scripture through orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We believe that the Spirit of God works through our intellect and gives us discerning minds. We believe that God works in and through our communal lives. Therefore, we value coherent doctrine regardless of the context.[91] This does not mean theology is not culturally influenced, but doctrinally grounded.

We are constantly trying to answer the question, "Who is God?" Although culture tends to inform our theology, we must not allow culture to dictate God's identity. Because all theology is contextual and culture is vast, unity within the church seems to be a stretch. Where cultural differences divide the church, keeping an open dialogue about theology is a means of unity. Valentin uses the term "public theology" to call the church to use a broad scope of dialogue in theology beyond cultural differences. His proposal does not negate cultural identity, but broadens the listening arena in the public sphere.

[91]Church of the Nazarene Board of General Superintendents, *Nazarene Essentials.* (Kansas City, MO: Church of the Nazarene, 2015).

Goheen would agree that unity should be the church's identity when he states, "Disunity is scandalous because it contradicts the church's message."[92]

If disunity undercuts the church's work, is there a theological framework that could unite the global church? Is there universality about God that can keep the church grounded in scripture, transcend cultural tradition, unify the church, and inform us about God's mission? Trinitarian theology is a good starting point because it is centralized teaching in the Christian faith about God. We confess that God is One. God is divinely revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; all three persons of the Trinity begin equal, distinct, share the same divine nature, and exist from and for all eternity. It is our distinctive doctrine apart from all other religions. The United Methodist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Wesleyan Church, and Free Methodist Church all begin their journey in their articles of faith with a statement of the Trinity. It is also the first article of faith within the Church of the Nazarene stating:

> We believe in the one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the universe; that He only is God, holy in nature, attributes and purpose. The God who is holy love and light is Triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[93]

Although the words in the articles of faith in the church manual are accessible and intelligible, it is difficult even for trained theologians to comprehend them. We must regard God's actions and nature in loving unifying ways. Although reason, tradition, and experience are three of the four vehicles to help Wesleyans understand Christian beliefs

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[92] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 64.

[93] Church of the Nazarene, "Articles of Faith" – *Manual 2017–2021*, https://2017.manual.nazarene.org/section/articles-of-faith/.

and practices, these vehicles may never help prove the necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity. Watler Kasper says:

> "There are three points in particular that remain incomprehensible and impenetrable to our minds: 1. The absolute unity of God despite the distinction of person; 2. The absolute equality of the persons despite the dependence of the second on the first and of the third on the first and second; 3. The eternity of God as Father, Son, and Spirit despite the fact that are established as such by the activities of generation and spiration. But then, do we even grasp the absolute simplicity of God despite the multiplicity and differentiation of his attributes, or his absolute immutability and eternity despite the multiplicity of his activities and of his involvements in history?"[94]

We see scriptural foundations examples of Trinitarian theology in biblical narratives of creation, Jesus's life, ministry, and baptism. In these examples, we see that the Trinity is a community of love that is shared between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Peterson states, "'Trinity' is the theological formulation that most adequately provides a structure for keeping conversations on the Christian life coherent, focused, and personal. Under the image of the Trinity, we discover that we do not know God by defining him but by being loved by him and loving in return."[95]

There are unifying implications when a theology of a deferring relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is brought into public discourse. We will discuss the activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the next chapter. Where discord and strife can be found in the vast array of cultures, knowing God as triune can transcend the historical and cultural experience. The theologians brought to the table for conversation in Green's work, as mentioned above, are interested in cultural theology that unifies the church.

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[94] Alister. E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 247-248.

[95] Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008). Xix-xx

Pope Francis says, “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity.”[96] A contextual church’s theology rooted in scripture through the lens of the Trinity will find a motive and pattern for the mutual love and submission that will bring unity to the church.

The church is a voluntary association of people that echoes Trinitarian theology simply within its structure. First, it exists because all things come from and return to God the Father. Second, the church is a metaphor for a building as a household of God the Father with Jesus Christ being the cornerstone (Eph 2:19-22). Or the church can be more intimately described as the body of Jesus Christ (Eph 1:22-23). Third, the Holy Spirit is who gave birth to the church. The church shares one common Spirit with Christ, therefore there is an intimacy of the union between Christ and the church. The image painted for us in Ephesians 4:3-6 allows us to capture the essence of the church in Trinitarian form when it says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit−just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” The call to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit is to keep the unity of the church. It is the Holy Spirit who is the church’s unity.

Even Stephanie A. Lowery makes a case for the African church to embrace Trinitarian Theology to define relationships with God and for the church. The African experience is unfamiliar and disoriented with Western traditional familial roles. She lets

[96] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 89.

John Mary Waliggo have a voice of authority in this conversation when she states of him, "His own proposal is to root ecclesiology in Christology and the Trinity, describing a 'community of life' unified in Christ, an approach designed to give priority to biblical imagery while still contextualizing, taking care that context does not become the determining factor."[97]

Regardless, teachings from the Bible need to be interpreted from the context of culture. As stated before, contextual theology is a theological system that considers not only culture but also socio-political, ideological, and historical factors. Much like liberation, feminist, black, and Latin American Theology, rural theology is a different context in which a particular theology occurs. A small pool of resources has contributed to the definition of "rural theology" compared to those theologies listed above. Leslie Francis states:

> There is no one thing that is rural theology, but there is a distinctive perspective from which rural theology regards the study of God, the revelation of God, the experience of God. Like other contextual theologies, rural theology does not exist for its own benefit, for its own salvation. Rural theology is not an isolationist movement, not an escape into rural retreat. Rural theology exists to serve the whole people of God, the whole Church of God, and to interact with the whole of the theology faculty.[98]

Busic gives convincing evidence of the Church of the Nazarene experiencing "rural retreat" in his book, *The City*. Although "rural retreat" is a cultural phenomenon that might be challenging to identify within the local context, Francis is regarding theology that is birthed in the rural context. Busic, on the other hand, is advocating care and

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[97] Green, *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue*, 77.

[98] Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

practice for the urban centers and warning the church against such neglect by "retreating" to the rural areas. The purpose of the discovery of rural theology is to discover the mission of God in the rural context. Not all theology serves as an asset to that discovery.

Like many contextual theologies, there are deficits alongside their adequacies. In the rural context, there is a clash between the "rugged individualistic" culture that drives many of the members of the rural church and practicing Trinitarian theology. That culture produces an autonomy driven organization that is more modeled after church growth strategies, rather than being rooted in theological cues that inform its practices. Jürgen Moltmann describes the selfless economy of the Trinity when he states, "It introduces a contradiction to the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity: the God who loves the world does not correspond to the God who suffices for himself."[99] There is a need for the rural church to turn from the self-reliant spirit and embrace the economics of the Trinity where all resources are concentrated on God's mission.

What follows are a few observations of Trinitarian theology done in the rural context. The church confesses that God is One. God is divinely revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; all three persons of the Trinity begin equal, distinct, sharing the same divine nature, and existing from and for all eternity. This Trinitarian statement is not unique to the global church; therefore, it is not distinctively "rural" either. For rural theology, Trinitarian theology begins as an adequate framework because it grounds the whole church in thinking wisely, prayerfully, and scripturally about who God is, what He is up to, and how he invites us to participate.

[99] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 151.

So often, the church gets caught up in modes and methods of evangelism yet neglects ecology−the first command (Gn 1:28). By anchoring identity in the Trinity, the church's purpose becomes grander. God's concern far exceeds the success within the institution of the church, the people in our community, or the prosperity of a particular nation. Understanding ourselves as a sending church engages the restorative activity of the Trinity and allows us to participate fully in the full mission of God. So in considering rural theology, the culture has a close tie to the landscape, which involves all of creation. The gospel is not just for individual salvation or the salvation of a particular theology. A good dissertation of Colossians 1:15-23 would conclude that Christ ushering the good news was not limited to the sake of humanity. Colossians 1:15-16 states, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created." If we continue to read this poem, we find a new Exodus context where God has delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and restored us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. We find in this poem, as well a new Temple claim, that in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily. Verse 18 says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him." Therefore the restoration through Jesus Christ was given to all of creation in verse 20. Tim Gibson says:

> Humans have a particular role in this process of reconciliation because they share in the redemptive project as those who image the Triune God. But that does not entitle humans to plunder the earth, or to prioritize our own interests over those of the non-human creation because all of God's creatures are equal in sharing the narrative of salvation.[100]

[100] Tim Gibson, *Church and Countryside: Insights from Rural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 9.

The connection between Trinitarian and new creation reflects "a story that requires humans to be in the right relationship with the rest of creation, which is also bound up in God's saving work, and that they are in the right relationship with one another."[101] Gibson gives another good example in this arena. He states:

> This is a world in which we seek to image the Trinitarian God in profound ways that reflect our reconciliation to God through Christ, sustained by the Holy Spirit, and our hope for God's good future. We are called to live as a restored community; we are obliged to live a life in which the good of others is our primary concern. In short, we are a new creation. That is our place in the drama of Christian salvation history, as those who are reconciled to the Trinitarian God whom we seek to image and whom we worship on our knees.[102]

Therefore, as we observe Trinitarian theology in the rural context, we also follow the theological implications of all creation.

Much like liberationists, in rural theology, one would hear pastors and theologians preach or teach about God delivering the person from those economic oppressions through personal financial breakthroughs. The phrase often used in this setting is, "God is setting the captives free." Even the object of liberation is sometimes limited to those incarcerated, addicted, and marginalized. "God doing a new thing" would captivate the individual by the interpretation that the "new thing" is making the individual "new." According to Gibson, rural theology "will ask how Christian disciples can interact with the farmer and the headteacher in ways that image God who is Trinity, in whose new creation we are called to have a right relationship with our fellow creatures."[103] It is the

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[101] Ibid., 18.

[102] Ibid., 3.

[103] Ibid. 61.

echoing of Isaiah 43:19 we find in Revelation 21:5 that the activity of God is in the process of "making all things new."

If we begin by identifying God as triune, then it leads us to ask the question, "What is God up to?" After all, it has been stated above by Wright that to know Him is to know His mission. Does the identity of the Trinity inform us of God's activity in our world? To put it simply: what is the mission of God? God's Trinitarian attributes allow the church to see His activity within His creation. First, the Father is revealed in creation as a nurturer and creator. Moltmann helps us see God's self-limitation when he states, "In order to create something 'outside' himself, the infinite God must have made room for this finitude beforehand, 'in himself.'"[104] The narrative of creation in Genesis 1 places Trinitarian identity within the identity of the creation of humankind, within the pronouncement, "Let us make man in our image." This pinnacle of the story of God's good creation is introduced to the created beings that would eventually scar creation and relationship with the Father through their disobedience in Genesis 3. Van Gelder and Zscheile affirm God's activity in The Fall and creation. They write, "God's mission begins with creation but unfolds biblically in large measure as a response to this (The Fall) predicament of broken communion."[105]

We see God the Father's restorative activity being traced through the Old Testament (OT) beyond the creation narrative. We can see it in the covenant God made with Abram to be the father of a great people and a blessing to all nations. Abraham would be the carrier of redemption for God's "elect" people in the nation of Israel. The

[104] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 109.

[105] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission,* 269

word “elect” or “election” would eventually reveal God’s purpose in sending the Son to fulfill the promise to be a blessing to all nations. God’s activity of appointment or election is not an elite theology, but a means of redemption for all people. Wright states, “God’s election of Israel is instrumental in God’s mission for all nations.”[106] It is the wooing of the Father that is drawing all mankind to Himself. The people that God has appointed are called the Church, and a means of grace to bless all who fall under the umbrella of creation.

In light of The Fall, contextual theologians would point to God’s mission in restoring both creation and humanity. God’s mission and plan for making restoration of both creation and humanity are fulfilled in the sending of His only Son. Jesus reveals the mission of the Father to bring salvation to creation and mankind. The clarity of God’s activity in restoration is more fully seen in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Newbigin understands the nature of the Father is more prevalent in Jesus as he carries out the mission of God in relation to a caring Father. Newbigin writes, “God’s fatherly rule of all things is at the very heart of [Jesus’s] teaching.”[107] It is the Son who carries out his mission in intimate communion with the Father. Therefore, he can trust in the Father’s wisdom and obey his sovereign rule. Thus, Christ’s way of mission follows the path of trust, love, and obedience of a son to his father.

In the Holy Scriptures, we examine the Holy Spirit referred to as the Spirit of the Son (Gal 4:6), Spirit of Christ (Rm 8:9 and Phil 1:19), Spirit of the Father (Mt 1:20), and

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[106] Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 72.

[107] Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 39.

Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11). This Trinitarian deflection narrates God's restoration method to all of creation through the sending of the Son and Spirit. As for Wright, he makes the case that God's mission is more accurately depicted in a Trinitarian activity of "sending." He identifies the nature and activity of God when we witness God the Father as the sender of the Son and the Spirit.[108] It is the answer of who became flesh and tabernacled or pitched his tent in our midst in the Gospel of John. The heart of God, through the sending and sharing of the Son and Spirit, is One and is the lifeblood of the church, which enables it to live and work for God's Kingdom.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul gives a great dissertation on the characteristics of the Trinity through the Son in Chapter 2. In Philippians 2:6-11, Paul gives us his full incarnational theology after admonishing the church to follow Christ's mindset:

> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We assume that the divinity of Christ Jesus is condensed in Paul's letter. The key issue for Paul is that Jesus is the embodiment of God. Jesus is Yahweh himself. And it is to him alone that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord who defers the glory to the Father.

[108] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 210.

This "sending and sharing God" reveals the partnership between God and His Church. His actions manifested through the Holy Spirit by breathing life and empowering the church to do the ministry of the Son makes us more aware of God's operations. It is Van Gelder who states, "The Holy Spirit is the key to interpreting God's expansive, ongoing work of creation and reconciling in the church and world."[109] Although there is a mystery in God's salvation throughout creation, His Church is deemed the "elect" that continues that work. He also says, "God's mission has a church. This consists of people of promise called from every tribe and nation to live under God's gracious rule in the power of the Spirit. The church is sent to witness in word and deed to God's renewal of creation in Jesus."[110] Moltmann places full responsibility for God's mission on the triune God by stating, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the father that includes the church, creating a church along the way."[111] Goheen takes it even further to illuminate the partnership of the Trinity and the church. He says, "It means that God's power to heal the creation has entered history in the person of Jesus and by the work of the Spirit."[112] God, through the Holy Spirit, has relational activities with the church. Goheen continues, "First, the new powers are the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings the new world of the kingdom of God into the midst of the old world."[113] Therefore, solidifying the

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[109] Van Gelder, 275.

[110] Ibid. 36-37.

[111] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 64.

[112] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 74.

[113] Ibid., 74.

Trinitarian nature of God is actively in shared partnership with the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Church.

On the other hand, if we misunderstand or mishandle God's revealing power through Trinity, we risk comprehending God in modalistic ways, which comes with a risk of disunity. Just as the term "modalism" connotes images of three distinct persons working independently. Modalism is a common struggle within the Church. Regardless, if the church takes cues from a modalistic God, the reflection looks like scarcity, self-preservation, elitism, and division. The product of modalism would be a lack of social reform, community development, resource sharing, and communal life. Moltmann says about the social Trinity:

> The triune God is reflected only in a united and uniting community of Christians without domination and subjection and united and uniting humanity without class rule and without dictatorial oppression. That is the world in which people are defined by their social relationships and not by their power or their property. That is the world in which human beings have all things in common and share everything with one another except their personal qualities.[114]

Therefore, it helps our understanding of the Trinity in terms of behavior. For the rural theologian, Trinitarian theology is best comprehended in communal terms. Not only does the Trinity have a theological function, but also a social function as well. The relational implications of Trinitarian theology in the rural context will transform how the body of believers do life together. It is not simply for the practices within the liturgy but reforms everyday life into a sacramental life. A Trinitarian undergirding of life no longer allows the believer to compartmentalize their life into categories, but everything that the life of the believer possesses belongs to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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[114] Alister E.McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 266.

There are many aspects of Trinitarian theology that are hard to grasp. The church has the responsibility to teach the Trinity with careful verbal definitions rather than concrete analogies. With the risk of completely personifying the Trinity, many have used the etymology for the word *perichoresis* as a kind of Trinitarian dance. This analogy risks oversimplifying or undermining the Trinitarian truth through human explanations and experience. Instead of the preoccupation with explaining the three-in-one God-heads, the Trinity is best understood in relationships with one another. The Trinity is the fundamental foundation for our relationships with God and one another by illuminating God's relational character. Moltmann states, "The three divine Persons exist in their particular, unique natures as Father, Son, and Spirit in their relationships to one another, and are determined through these relationships."[115] The conclusion is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coinhere in such a way that the persons are always eternally with and in one another, yet without merging, blending, or confusion. We can only revere our triune God as genuinely three and truly one by proclaiming the reciprocal indwelling of each other, in each other.

The bond of relational cues within the Trinity will be the most helpful within the rural context. The "oneness" of God speaks to the value of all. The health of the rural church is dependent upon the debts of relational investment with each other and the community. There is no one that is undervalued, overlooked, or isolated. As stated before, even for the professional theologian, the Trinity is the most challenging concept to apprehend in concrete measures. It is a challenge for ordinary theology to thicken its

[115] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 172.

Trinitarian theology due to its mystery. One will not discover a denial of the Trinity in theory but rather in practice.

CHAPTER 4

RURAL MISSIOLOGY

The confession of the Trinity has community implications. Pope Francis writes, "It is imperative that the church relates to the secular community if it is to be truly faithful to the Trinitarian doctrine."[116] When the church grapples with its purpose and identity, the first question that needs to be asked is not "Who are we?" but rather, "Who is God?" This question is the practical application of theology. When we discover the identity of God, we also discover our own identity. The revelation of God leads us to ask more relevant questions pertaining to our existence. Our framing theology should inform ecclesiology. For Christopher Wright, our understanding of the mission of God is informed by our understanding of the character of God. He states, "Knowing God was a responsibility. It generated an agenda, a mission."[117] Eugene Peterson states, "'Theology' is the attention that we give to God, the effort we give to knowing God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and in Jesus Christ," and that "systematic, biblical, practical, and

[116] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 240.

[117] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 151.

historical theology has to do with the living God who creates us as living creatures to live to his glory."[118]

It should be noted when we attempt to discuss culture and missiology, it is much like asking a goldfish to discuss water. Our culture is the water in which we all swim. Without careful consideration of its source, it is difficult to grasp. Similarly, for the institution of the church, missiology is the swimming water as well. To better understand its origins, we have to trace its steps back to the roots of theology. Theology informs missiology. We cannot simply say, "This is how we do things around here," and expect a healthy undergirding of our missiology. Rural congregations have to navigate the tension of theology and expediency. Stanton explains it, "The tension, then, is navigating the weakness of both 'theology without practice' or 'practice without theology.'" He goes on to say, "Theology must be what the church uses to evaluate all other fields; that analysis is of little value unless it can guide our practices in meaningful ways.[119]

The "way we do things around here" mindset within the rural congregation creates deficits in its theology of work. This type of undergirding theology creates a theocracy where power, authority, and direction for the church are human-driven. The product of this theology limits the church to its own resources and traditions, rather than being attentive to the community in which it is planted. More efforts are spent exegeting congregational needs, rather than exegeting the community to discover missional opportunities. It is an undergirding that also creates little room for assisting those in need and resource sharing.

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[118] Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, xvii-xix.

[119] Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural*, 81.

Disregarding any social reforms is evidence that the local body has vacated from a Trinitarian theological framework as a theology of mission and work. There are strong, numerical congregations that regard baptisms, confessions of faith, and memberships as the significant signposts of "Kingdom building." This is a descriptor of fundamentalism. Although baptisms, confessions of faith, and memberships are important doctrinal practices, it leaves out the church's work and presence within the public spheres. Timothy L. Smith argues that a shift in the Church of the Nazarene happened between 1910 and the 1930s where the church's concern for social welfare shifted to church members' personal behavior. He coined this shift as the "Great Reversal."[120] This shift is still affecting the Church of the Nazarene today by creating a dichotomy where the theological framework within the institution has to be either concerned for souls or social structures.

It should also be noted the influences of dispensationalism bred within the work of the church in partnerships with our community. The narration of a church's eschatology is one that the effects of sin only create more moral and social decay, then social reform through the church becomes insignificant for the body of Christ. Dwight L. Moody, in his earlier thinking, believed that all resources in the evangelical realm should be focused on saving souls. He writes:

> The world would get worse and worse until the Second Coming of Christ. Christians therefore should set their affections in a heavenly direction; home, food, clothes, health, and financial security would follow for those who would first seek the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness. Poverty would be overcome and diligence would replace indolence.[121]

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[120] David Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Reconciling Evangelism and Social Concern* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 30.

[121] Ibid., 32.

The creation of the dichotomies works in opposition to each other and to the relevance of God's mission through the church. The labels created within this dichotomy form cultural pressures within the church. If the church's resources are guided towards soul-winning, then it is labeled as a "conservative" congregation. If the church's resources are guided toward humanitarian efforts, it is labeled as a "liberal" congregation, which is a derogatory term in a rural context.

In the church's practice, the Trinitarian language is rarely used within the liturgy. We will hear Trinitarian language echoed in baptism and a marriage pronouncement but rarely spoken over the elements of the Lord's Supper, prayer, or benedictions. Most prayers and benedictions point to the name of Jesus. Our Protestant preference has been Jesus-heavy. We can appropriate multiple factors into the disconnection of Trinitarian theology and practice. Mishandling effective ways of presenting the Trinity, a lack of understanding or education, and generational malfunctions are factors in our malpractice of Trinitarian eschatology. For the rural church to practice Trinitarian theology, she must embrace the Trinity regarding how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact with each other and humanity. God has made himself known, and human limitations should not allow disregard for good practices of Trinitarian work within the rural context.

Trinitarian theology roots not only contextual theologians in scripture and inform God's activity in the world, but also have ecclesial implications. So if the triune God is a sending and sharing God and is in active partnership with the church, by what means should the church be active in God's mission? To know God and to discover God's

agenda is to discover our identity and mission. To truly know God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to liberate the church in God's mission. Pope Francis says it this way:

> To believe in a father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that 'he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity.' To believe that the Son of God assumed our human flesh means that each human person has been taken up into the very heart of God. To believe that Jesus shed his blood for us removes any doubt about the boundless love which ennobles each human being. Our redemption has a social dimension because 'God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between men.' To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds: 'The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable.' Evangelization is meant to cooperate with this liberating work of the Spirit. The very mystery of the Trinity reminds us that we have been created in the image of that divine communion and so we cannot achieve fulfillment or salvation purely by our own efforts.[122]

For Pope Francis, even the term "evangelism" is broader than the preoccupations found within Western theologies of the term. The goal of evangelism is not reduced to an invitation to a gathering event but is a product of sharing the good news of the Gospel to the poor. If the church claims her identity as the *ekklesia*, she cannot reduce her name to simply "those who gather," but rather as to how the activity of the triune God participates.

Communion with the Father

For the church to know God in communion with the Father is to identify as holy, children of God. The church needs to actively recall and rehearse all roles and names that the Father has pronounced. The rural church cannot get caught in the explanation of the

[122] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 131.

Trinity as a whole, but rather the roles the Trinity plays in our reality. The church's identity in knowing the Father is to know itself in God's history and His story by being submerged by scripture. Therefore, the church will not be preoccupied with its own history, yet more concerned about God's history. For Newbigin, the story of God is the story of "cosmic history."[123] This has two implications pertaining to the church and history. Goheen writes, "First, the Bible is universal history that narrates the true story of the whole world from creation to consummation. Second, a central thread in the biblical narrative is that God has chosen a people to be the bearers of the end and meaning of this story."[124]

For Wright, he condenses the tracing of God's people through biblical history to this: "The history of mission is the history of the spread of God's blessing, the history of God keeping his promise to Abraham."[125] The church can trace its lineage and identity as children and the elect through Abraham. This implies that the church is to bear the identity of God through his promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all people. Pope Francis puts it this way, "Being the Church means being God's people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love."[126] The Church recalls its identity and purpose through scripture and goes to work as children of the living God.

God's children are about the Father's business. One dimension of being about the Father's business is our active participation in the redemption of creation. Wright submits

[123] Lesslie Newbigin, "The Bible: Good News for Secularised People," 1991, 6, https://missionworldview.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ea8a85_faf8a6551b14431db8fd326cdc197c6a.pdf.

[124] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocatio*n, 18.

[125]Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 69.

[126] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 87.

a holistic approach to creation care through the activity of the triune God, but makes a great point about God's pronouncement of making all things new before the introduction of Christ. He states, "The words, 'Behold, I am creating new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65:17−the opening word is a participle, suggesting it is something God is already active in doing, not merely a future intention)"[127] Similarly, Van Gelder alludes that creation care is the call of the collective community. He states, "Humanity is created with a particular vocation: to cultivate creation collaboratively with God (Gen. 1:28). This includes naming, taking care of other creatures, and seeking the flourishing of the whole in the relationship with God's ongoing creative work."[128]

For Wright, creation care is the vocation of the church because it bears the good news of the gospel, not only for the individual but for the whole world. He states, "So our care for creation is motivated not solely by the fact that it was created by God and we were commanded to look after it, but also by the fact that it has been redeemed by Christ, and we are to erect signposts towards its ultimate destiny of complete restoration in Christ." He goes on to say, "Mission is intensified for us as redeemed human beings because we look forward to the redemption of creation as well."[129] So it is through the Father that sends Jesus Christ to carry out God's mission to all creation. This is an obvious shift of focus between the Father to the Son in our discussion as it relates to the mission of God through the church. This is the nature of a sending and sharing God.

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[127] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 57.

[128] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission*, 269.

[129] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 61.

Communion with the Son

For the church to know God in communion with the Son is to take on the incarnation identity. Andrews F. Walls writes, "Incarnation is the translation: it is the Word becoming flesh as a prelude to repeated acts of translating that message into every culture in every time and place."[130] The church is to embody the reign of God's Kingdom through Jesus Christ. There is a continuing pull and tension between living in the world but not of the world (Jn 15:19, 17:14-16; 1 Jn 2:15; 1 Cor 5:9-10). Ruth Padilla Deborst quotes Renè Padilla on this matter, "To speak of the Kingdom of God is to speak of God's redemptive purpose for the whole creation and the historical vocation that the church has concerning that purpose here and now, 'between the times."[131] This incarnational mission is to embody what it means to be self-sacrificing as the Church participates in Kingdom citizenship. Living in God's Kingdom is a mission of love for neighbor and creation that is not natural but transformational through the Son. Through Adam, our natural father (1 Cor. 15), we understand our natural inclination is to affirm the self. As a result of our natural intent, there is death and the martyrdom of creation through our selfish manners. Yet through Jesus, our inheritance is that we are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) made in the image of God to participate in the mission of God. Through Jesus, the church is liberated to participate in the nature of selfless love for the benefit of the whole world. This incarnational mission is not an individual transformation, but rather a mission that is local that moves into the neighborhood.

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[130] Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: Orbis Books, 2015), 27.

[131] Green, *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue*, 50.

The good news of the Gospel is that God has come and ushered salvation for all mankind and all of creation through Jesus Christ. This is the message that the church bears and boldly proclaims. How the church bears this mission is how it is lived in the marketplace of its believers. The salvation by grace that Jesus has wrought upon the cross is meant to have transformative powers of how the church is to work, live, and play. The work and sacrifice of the cross informs us of God's mission as well as how the Church participates. Van Gelder says that the mission that the church is involved in, takes the form of the cross. He writes, "Mission patterned in the way of the cross requires a new humility and willingness to share power, in which space is opened up for neighbors to be heard and embraced."[132] There is a dimension of the doctrine of salvation that has stagnated the Western church. The participation of the cross has been commercialized, and salvation has been tailored to the individual to reap the egocentric benefits. Although salvation is experienced individually, it falls short when it is indoctrinated as only an isolated event and is not ushered into the neighborhood. Goheen would agree that if the church's doctrine of salvation is limited to individualism and not commissioned to the marketplace, then the mission of God is not being fulfilled.[133] This mission of God is visible and tangible through the lens of the Father sending the Son and the Son commissioning his disciples to make more disciples. Those disciples are not orphaned without power to move among the neighborhood, rather they are embraced and empowered by Christ sending the Holy Spirit.

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[132] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission*, 279.

[133] This is a generalized statement that is gleaned from the author's reflection on evangelism. Specifically he states on page 96 "...if evangelism is selfish-that is, inviting people to enjoy the benefits of salvation-it also creates a church that is not ready to take up its mission in the world." Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 92-97.

We believe that the mission of the church is to embrace incarnational living. By incarnation, in Jesus, the Word became human flesh and tabernacled among us (Jn 1:14). Andrew Walls helps put this truth into context in describing incarnational translations. Language is always particular and specific to a cultural context. It seeks to communicate universal truths. The gospel is universal precisely by being particular and local. Walls writes, "God's translation of the Word into an embodied life in Jesus Christ within the cultural situation of first-century Palestine is the prelude to an ongoing pattern of translation into every time and place in every culture in the world."[134] God participates with civilization in the incarnation. To fulfill its calling in the rural setting, the church must nurture this significant aspect. The church loses its unique testimony when it only welcomes culture without engaging in critical discourse. However, the church on mission will not be able to communicate effectively with its neighbors if it does not sufficiently integrate the gospel into the local culture.

Communion with the Holy Spirit

For the church to know God in communion with the Holy Spirit is to embrace the power to be transformed into the image of God and the guidance to usher change in individuals and the public square. Wright is in alignment with Newbigin in relation to bridging the gap between the work of the third person of the Trinity and the work of the church. He writes:

> "Ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses." Although the final victory is not yet revealed, the gift of the Spirit is the sign of its coming, or our sharing in Him is a

[134] Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 26.

> foretaste of the powers of the age to come. The Spirit is given us in order that we may be witnesses, for He is the primary witness to Christ, bringing the world now under the judgment which is the final judgment, granting signs of the hidden victory, and giving the human words of Christ's messengers the power of God Himself… it is the Spirit who gives Christ's people the word to speak when they are brought before kings and governors for His sake. It is the Spirit who grants signs and wonders to accompany the ministry of the apostles, as that of Jesus Himself. It is by the Spirit that the words of the Gospel preaching come with power to the hearers-power to be the actual instrument of God's election (1 Thess. 1:4-5). The gift of the Spirit, itself the sign and foretaste of the age to come, is the means by which the Church is enabled to lead this present age to its consummation, by bringing the Gospel to all nations.[135]

In other words, it is within the public square that the Spirit of God flexes its activity by enabling Jesus's disciples to fearlessly give testimony to God's redemptive work. Pope Francis encapsulates our evangelistic efforts working in tandem with the Holy Spirit. He states, "The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable. Evangelization is meant to cooperate with this liberating work of the Spirit."[136] This is not to mean that the elect's mission is to simply speak on the matters of God's redemptive work but to also engage in the redemptive work.

The church working tandemly in partnership with the Holy Spirit unleashes her in the Holy Spirit's mission. As stated in the section that discussed the Holy Spirit's part in the Trinitarian mission of God, it is through the Spirit that the ministry of "newness" can be imagined. If the church embraces the life brought to her by the Holy Spirit, then it gives imagination to the possibility of new creation and new community. What is meant by imagination is that the Holy Spirit empowers the church to engage with the cultural

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[135] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 286.

[136] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 131.

settings and creatively strategize with innovative means. Richard Bauckham discusses a new community by means of which it is called to be counter-cultural. He writes,

> "What is needed is for the Christian community to develop as a counter-cultural alternative to the dominant culture, in its own life together both distinctive and outgoing, shaping its members' lives, both within and without the community's own life, in ways that witness to Jesus Christ, in critical solidarity with all that is good in dominant society and in the prophetic critique of all that is corrupting and destructive."[137]

This "newness" is engaged in creation and community. It is God's people engaging in redemptive practices on the social scale that also draws all of humanity and creation back to the Father.

For the rural church, it has to embrace the full nature of the Trinity on mission with its community. The church that believes that God exists as Trinity, a perfect community of persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), is a church that believes in God's gracious gift of salvation to participate in perfect relationship. All are welcomed to participate in this movement and relationship of the Trinity. It is a movement with God to characterize the relationships within the life of the church. If the church is a signpost of God's plan for humanity, it will have to explore missional partnerships with others in the community.

The mission of the triune God is where the church finds its identity. It is fundamentally missionary by nature. This is an often misinterpreted reality, as mission was viewed as a specific activity of the church for most of Western Christian history−similar to sending trained missionaries abroad. Van Gelder talks about this idea developing in the early 1940s, stating, "Theological education and formation of leaders

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[137] Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York: Psychology Press, 1999), 174-75.

continued to develop during this period within the framework of viewing mission as only one activity among many for the church or as something to be pursued by independent organizations."[138] The deeper Trinitarian origins of the mission are betrayed by this misinterpretation. The rural church should be more appropriately positioned to reflect God's mission and the Trinitarian nature as she makes intentional space for that which brings life. Brad E. Kelle traces God's good intention for humankind and creation stating, "At the very outset of the Old Testament story we see a glimpse of the rightly-related creation that marks God's intentions for the world-everything existed and functioned together in mutually beneficial ways as God had designed it."[139] The church is "missionary" as it flows out of its being. The mission of the Father, Son, and Spirit includes the church and even goes so far as to establish a church along the road; it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to carry out throughout the world.[140]

If "ordinary theology" is about listening well to discover what God is doing within the life of the church and the community, then the church will discover initiatives that move the church outside of its liturgical life[141] and into less formal "work of the people" in the expanded community. This is where Trinitarian theology and ordinary theology collide into a beautiful picture of the mission of God. Van Gelder and Zscheile say, "This abiding in the triune God's communal life and love frees disciples of Jesus to

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[138] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission*, 151.

[139] Brad E. Kelle, *Telling the Old Testament Story, God's Mission and God's People.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 36.

[140] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 64.

[141] "Liturgical" will be used in the formal sense of the word. It is meant to differentiate between the institutional aspects of worship in juxtaposition to "ordinary" life outside organized and corporate religious activities.

attend and listen deeply to their neighbors. Such deep listening is learned within the gathered community of the church so that disciples grow in their ability to empathetically hear others' stories, struggles, and dreams."[142] Rural churches that are established tend to struggle to connect with the cultural context. The trend is to normalize what we are most familiar with: missional practices that encourage partnerships with outside organizations reflect a sending and sharing nature of God. It is within the missional practices of the rural church we can discover signposts of the Trinity that promote oneness or modalistic ways that promote separation and disunity.

[142] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission*, 319.

CHAPTER 5

RURAL ECCLESIOLOGY

The best practices of the gathered people of God result from a thorough comprehension of God's nature, character, and mission. The theology and missiology of God undergird and develops the expression of the gathered people of God. It is easy to see challenges in distinguishing the differences between theology, missiology, and ecclesiology as they are tandem topics. You can only discover one with the other. Van Gelder and Zscheile say, "This means, first, that missiology and ecclesiology can no longer be separated, and, second, that theology and missiology cannot be separated either. These are inherently interrelated in what technically can be referred to as a 'missiological ecclesiology' and a 'theological missiology.'"[143]

Up to this point, as we have discovered in Chapter 3, a great place to begin in the journey of knowing God is discovering Him in relationship with communion with each other through Trinitarian means. This means that if God is one, then the Church is one. We also discovered in Chapter 4 that the church expressed in the local context submits itself to the mission of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not the church that has a mission, it is God who is on mission and creates the church along the way.

[143] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission*, 58.

Ecclesiology stems from the Greek word "*ekklesia,*" meaning gathered or assembly. Ecclesia is better understood in the practices of the church. We confess in the Apostles' Creed believing in "the Holy Catholic Church." We confess this in the CTN about the Church:

> We believe in the Church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word.
>
> God calls the Church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of the Word, observance of the sacraments, and ministry in His name; by obedience to Christ, holy living, and mutual accountability.
>
> The mission of the Church in the world is to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.
>
> The Church is a historical reality that organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms, exists both as local congregations and as a universal body, and also sets apart persons called of God for specific ministries. God calls the Church to live under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.[144]

There is a temptation to demote the understanding of what it means to be the Church based on the type of local expression. Sometimes highlighting the growth of urban churches devalues the smaller rural church. Regardless, the church is both universal and local. The church should be a visible and present representation of the triune God. This shifts our focus from the dynamic links between each congregation and the body of Christ to the dynamic interaction that an individual has with other members of their local body of believers. When we become church members, we do not lose who we are; rather,

[144] Church of the Nazarene, "Articles of Faith" – *Manual 2017–2021*.

we offer our special qualities, skills, and spiritual talents to the local church, where we support and uplift one another. The church can only be found in the context of a community, never in an individualist expression.

The earliest expression of the Church was not institutionalized or constrained to size to determine legitimacy. We can biblically see these expressions of sizes when they gathered in multitudes in Jerusalem (e.g. Jn 12:9-11 and Acts 1), smaller numbers in Colossae, to house gatherings led by Lydia in the book of Acts. Christ's presence is fully evident even in the smallest gathering of believers. Therefore, we cannot conclude what constitutes the expression of the church based upon its sum of numbers, but its capacity to gather. Gaze defines "church" as an "ecclesial community that participates in the four marks of church: oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity."[145]

The nature of a trinitarian church is dynamic. It does not exist for itself. A local expression of the Church is not only a component of the whole church, it is the Church at the same time. Therefore, the preoccupation with self-sustainability through institutional or business models reflects a church driven by the economics of the Kingdom of this world. The congregation's health should be evaluated at all times in the life of a church. The ecclesiological evaluation for health is not found in the statistical realm, but rather by evaluating the Trinitarian discipleship. This reflects how the culture perceives and understands the word "church" when it is mentioned. For some, "church" becomes synonymous with a local institution. It is heavily influenced by church growth strategies, physical properties, programming, and marketing strategies.

[145] Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, 120.

How the church organizes itself is essential for defining limitations for what constitutes and identifies a local church. For some, the goal of autonomy or self-sustaining is the mark of what defines a local congregation. Some denominations govern themselves from the *Episcopal* model where bishops are elected or appointed and direct church strategies from the top down. Bishops appoint pastors and are the voice of the laity. The membership has little authority in church affairs. Some denominations are more *Congregational* where the role of the local church is more autonomic. There are fewer relations with other congregations outside the local expression and within their own denomination. Some denominations draw from the *Presbyterian* model where there are no bishops and local churches are parts of larger units that are represented by clergy and lay representatives. These bodies elect delegates to the general meeting and the decisions of the general meeting are binding on the local churches. Terminology like parishes and circuits are more openly used to describe the local expressions that make up the larger unities.

The CTN has selected an intriguing framework for how it governs its own affairs. The CTN draws from all three forms of government listed above. They draw from an *Episcopal* model that has the concept of superintendency at the district and global levels. They also draw from the *Congregational* model where the local church express has the right to employ and call their own pastoral leadership. They also incorporate the *Presbyterian* model, which links and networks local, district, regional, and global assemblies and gatherings in order to govern itself. Drawing upon these three models of government allows for a more ambiguous and loose definition of the expression of the local church.

Although autonomy is not what drives the mission of the CTN, there are cultural influences that make autonomy the subject of local expression. The question of the ability to pay budgets, pensions, and benefits sometimes marks the local congregation for its sustainability. The congregations that either fail or cannot fulfill financial obligations in the CTN can be considered a church in crisis. This is just an example of autonomous subjectivity within the CTN. Even in the CTN, we need to continue to evaluate our subjectivity to autonomy in the local congregations because at the heart of the mission of the Church is not self-sufficiency or autonomy but rather a unity and oneness.

The rural church cannot define itself just by the people who attend services; instead, it must reflect how the triune God actively participates in all creation. As for Newbigin, he identifies *ekklesia* as a church that is gathered and scattered. The word should imply that the nature of the church is always being sent and going forth. It begins as a local congregation that morphs into a congregation elsewhere. He states, "The word 'church,' or ekklesia, is used in the New Testament always to describe the visible communities of humans in two senses: (1) local congregations and (2) the entire people that belong to Jesus Christ."[146] The rural culture cannot serve as a church for those who comfortably fall into the first category. The church must have a worldwide perspective. Suppose it cannot think outside of the confines of its local context. In that case, it fails the missional test and only exists for self-sustainability. Instead, it is a "community of life" unified in Christ, which is an approach designed to prioritize biblical imagery while still contextualizing.

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[146] Lesslie Newbigin, "1984 The Basis and the Forms of Unity: Second Peter Ainslie Lecture – Newbigin Resources," 7, https://newbiginresources.org/1984-the-basis-and-the-forms-of-unity-second-peter-ainslie-lecture/.

The relationship between God and His Church is made clear by "sending and sharing God." We become increasingly conscious of God's workings as they are made plain by the Holy Spirit, who gives the church the capacity to carry out Christ's, God's Son, mission. The church's lifeblood, which gives it the ability to exist and see God's Kingdom, is the heart of God, which is shown in the sending and sharing of the Son and Spirit. Therefore if the church sees itself as the sending church, it takes its ecclesial cues from the triune God. The rural church needs to be satisfied with the sending and sharing nature of the church. Again, it is the ministry of God that sends. The rural church will struggle with sending or sharing lay people and resources because of the fears of scarcity. But if the rural church has an undergirding of Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology, they will find themselves using that as an instrument to measure its effectiveness and significance.

Autonomy does not equal ecclesia. It should be expressed as the gathered people of God in holy communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Out of this understanding comes sacramental practices, incarnational living, and liberation through the Spirit. These practices are firmly rooted in trinitarian nature. Let us explore these three in the rural context.

Sacramental Practices

When we discuss sacramental practices, we are referring to the practices of worship. Within the Wesleyan tradition, we describe them as "means of grace." Another helpful image is how the Church officiates as the royal priesthood (1Pt 2:9-12). Wright states, "The goal of all our mission is the worship and glory of the one true living

God."[147] There are particular worship activities, but there is only one object of worship: God. Declaring God's praises together—in our readings, creeds, preaching, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, is one of our central acts of worship as the people of God."[148] McGrath writes:

> If Christ is the sacrament of God, the church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient sense of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.[149]

Therefore, we can appropriately state that the Church is not an expression of a sacrament; it is a sacrament.

Worship is the church's expression where creation returns to God. It is the Trinitarian essence of the church in words and acts that are offered up to God as a sacrifice of praise (Hb 13:15). Worship is not an action the church takes; it is not something it does. Instead, worship is the expression of God's triune existence as it flows through us in praise when we become willing instruments of God via the power of the Spirit. Thus, God's Trinitarian existence at work in us elicits our response to God's communion-creating redemption, which can take various forms. Those forms include but are not limited to vocal adoration, acts of obedience, participation in the Eucharist, and mourning and celebration with others.

Although God's movement for the people of God is towards the non-liturgical life of the church, it is within the liturgies that the people of God can find formation. Fixed

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[147] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 244.

[148] Ibid., 251.

[149] McGrath, *Christian Theology,* 403.

forms of worship, sometimes known as liturgy, are one of the most significant aspects of the Christian faith. The idea that Christian theologians pray and worship and that this devotional setting influences their theological insights has recently come to light. What Christians believe influences how they pray and worship, and how Christians pray and worship influences what Christians believe. Therefore, the soundness of practices within corporate worship matters.

A solid grasp of the Trinity is not often cultivated by our corporate worship. If prayer is an example of how we believe, we usually conclude our corporate prayers by isolating one of the Godheads. “In Jesus's name,” “Father God,” or “Through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” This is the liturgy that modularizes God. Prayers that more unify the triune God are offered to the Father, through the name of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, baptisms are the most profound means of grace connected to Trinitarian imagery. The church that capitalizes upon this imagery forms believers in how their belief plays in ordinary life.

One can conclude that tradition is more easily identified as the source of church practices before theology. Rarely will leaders of the ecclesial church be able to say at the moment, “We are practicing tithing because of the characteristic of the triune God.” Communion, prayer, giving of resources, and the public reading of scripture are all practices of worship that have a rich tradition within the Christian Church. Without a direct relationship with the living God, these practices are dead. The church's activities are merely done for a show because of a lack of theological knowledge. Giving of resources will never be transforming, prayer will never be more than a chat with an

imagined friend, and scriptural exhortation will just be loud noise to the church that lacks a theological understanding of its activities.

Recognizing and highlighting the Trinitarian character of worship is crucial. Without this acknowledgment, the worshiping community devolves into a group of people who associate with one another due to shared interests, just like any other association. Without this emphasis, worship becomes something we do, rather than participation in the Trinitarian life of God. Due to this, the doctrine of the Trinity is more of a practice than an aphorism to be accepted. Worship is the manifestation of belief in the Trinity.

Incarnational Living

The church must assume the identity of the incarnation if it is to know God in fellowship with the Son. As the Church participates in Kingdom citizenship, this incarnational ministry seeks to demonstrate what it means to be selfless. Living in God's Kingdom entails a purpose of love for one's neighbor and the environment that is not inherent but accomplished via the Son. Jesus has freed the church to engage in the nature of unselfish love for the good of all people. This incarnational purpose is a local, neighborhood-focused mission, rather than an individual makeover.

The Protestant perspective of the character of the church centers on the presence of Christ as a result of the preaching and sacraments, as well as the proclamation of his message. We believe that embracing incarnational life is the church's mission. The Word was incarnated and lived among us in the person of Jesus. John Calvin says:

> Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and listened to, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institutions, it is in no way to be doubted that a church of God exists. For his promise cannot fail: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 10:20). If the Ministry has the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church.[150]

Incarnation's subject is on Christ alone as he alone is the Word of God that became flesh. Christ is God's revelation in birth, life, death, and resurrection. Ultimately, the Word is not a text, but it is communion and fellowship. Jesus Christ is the communion of God that has come to be with humankind.

To be a people of God who intellectually and physically feast upon the Word of God is to become more like the Word of God. These Trinitarian images are heavily rooted in the Lord's Supper, where the Father sent the Word, and we use the means of grace to evoke the Spirit's work to transform us from the inside out. The gathering at the Lord's table is an act of thanksgiving to the Father and embracing Jesus Christ in relationship with the Spirit. John Wesley confirms this practice in his Sermon titled "The Duty of Constant Communion." He writes:

> The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins, and enables us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and the blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection. If, therefore, we have any regard for the plain command of Christ, if we desire the pardon of our sins, if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God, then we should neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord's Supper; then we must never turn our backs on the feast which our Lord has prepared for us. We must neglect no occasion, which the good providence of God affords us, for this purpose. This is the true rule: So often are we to receive as God gives us opportunity. Whoever, therefore, does not receive, but goes from the holy

[150] McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader,* 404.

> table, when all things are prepared, either does not understand his duty, or does not care for the dying command of his Saviour, the forgiveness of his sins, the 'strengthening of his soul, and the refreshing it with the hope of glory.[151]

In the Wesleyan tradition, discipleship is unavoidably social and communal. It calls on Christians to look out for one another in love via support and accountability to grow in the holiness of heart and life together through frequent gatherings for worship and small groups. According to Wesleyanism, Christians must cooperate in environments where they may see, hear, smell, touch, and embrace one another.

Liberation Through the Spirit

To accept the power to be changed into the image of God and the direction to usher about change in people and the public sphere is what it means for the church to know God in communion with the Holy Spirit. It is the power and work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the people of God and make them one. Jesus prayed in John 17:21, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” It is a unifying, evoking prayer that is only manifested through the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:2-6, 2:18-22; Acts 2:1; 1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:1-5). Therefore, the signpost of the ecclesial church is found in both the liberation and unification through the work of the Holy Spirit within the church.

Liberation in the sanctifying work is on display for the individual no longer bound to the inherited genetics of the fallen fatherhood of Adam. Liberation in the sanctifying work is on display when the church is no longer bound to this world's dying structures

[151] John Wesley, “The Duty Of Constant Communion (Sermon 101)” NNU, Wesley Center, accessed October 25, 2022, https://whdl.org/browse/resources/6875. 3.

and systems. Liberation in the sanctifying work on display for the community becomes a new creation for everyone to live in a peaceable kingdom. Leonardo Boff provides a clear understanding of this liberation in his work, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. He states:

> The church comes into being as a church when people become aware of the call to salvation in Jesus Christ, come together in community, profess the same faith, celebrate the same eschatological liberation, and seek to live the discipleship of Jesus Christ. We can speak of the church in the proper sense only when there is a question of this ecclesial consciousness.[152]

McGrath explains, "This 'ecclesial consciousness' is the result of the world of the holy Spirit, whose person and work are inseparable from the risen Christ."[153]

With the risk of placing too much focus upon one being of the Trinity, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that communities and churches are restored in full communion with the Father and the Son. When the church prays for revival, it depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit to do new works. Anthony Thiselton states, "The church is animated by the Spirit from Pentecost onward as it witnesses to God's ultimate future of restoration and communion."[154] Understanding the gifts and call of the Spirit for each disciple individually is joining God's incarnation journey into the community. The Spirit infuses societies that are mired in uncertainty, hopelessness, and worry. The Spirit provides unity and opens up new, thriving connections marked by forgiveness and reconciliation. The Spirit also gives individuals the ability to see beyond themselves. All this to be said, this

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[152] McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader,* 405.

[153]Ibid. 405.

[154] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission,* 274.

can only be conceptualized, experienced, and realized in holy communion with each other in the community called the Church.

When the church has broken communion, so does the neighborhood. It is not difficult to see broken communion within the community. It is statistically seen when there is a higher disregard for holy communion in fellowship, Word, and Spirit. The connection with the approximate community lends opportunities to celebrate and lament. The communal life with God is a call to be in communion with others, regardless of size. The way the church practices communion with the Father, Word, and Holy Spirit shapes the people of God.

Rural Church Practices

If we claim to believe that Trinitarian theology should shape ordinary theology, the language will be a big barrier. Greater attention to the language and illustrations will need to be done to effectively communicate while administering sacraments, leading worship, and preaching the gospel. Ordinary theology is not about "dumbing down" or lowering the level of church practices, but communicating in ordinary language. Therefore, while leading rural Christians, pastors must speak in terms appropriate for rural society and properly and plainly convey the truth of scripture. It is challenging, though, as it calls for extensive pastoral experience and an in-depth knowledge of rural life. Preachers have an enormous task because of this, which requires them to learn, research on their own, and create consistency.

There are helpful images that can convey images of Trinitarian theology that are local to the rural context. For example:

- “Creation care” may evoke liberal ideologies when speaking on ecology. A more adaptable way of talking about ecology in the rural context might be how a farmer diligently cares for the land, a hunter respects creation, or more familial terms like guardianship over stewardship.
- “Trinitarian Economy” may evoke images of systematic financial oppression and scarcity. More localized language that can be used when speaking on the doctrine of the Trinity would be crop-sharing, where a landlord and tenant reap the benefits of partnerships, or cooperatives that are affiliated with the high prices of local goods, and community-building.
- “Liberation” may evoke images of projected racism and defensiveness. It might be in the best interest of leadership to stay clear of nationalist terminologies as it may do more damage to our theological understanding than good. Languages that may promote these themes more adequately are 12-step programs, fire and rescue, unshackling, open hands, open doors, and graduating.
- “Reconciliation” may evoke images of abuse due to a higher divorce concentration in the rural community. Images that will help navigate around those are foster care and adoption, lion and lamb, wolf and calf, restoration, covenant, and fence-mending

The rural church will learn about initiatives that take it outside of its liturgical life and into less formal “labor of the people” in the larger community if “ordinary theology” is about listening properly to learn what God is doing inside the life of the church and the community. It will be important to implement images of communal life within the rural

worship services. This will stem from leadership being able to exegete the community and culture.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 6

RURAL INNOVATION

What is Multi-site?

Multi-site ministry is identified in some circles as a new vehicle for expanding a church's reach for new people and communities. The basic idea is a local congregation that expresses uniformity in structure and worship in multiple locations. There are other adaptations and variables to this basic definition of multi-site ministry. For example, Geoff Surratt states that the multi-site ministry expresses itself in five different or blended forms, the video venue, regional campus, teaching team, partnership, and low-risk.[155]

In the video-venue model, churches either simulcast or pre-record their sermons or worship videos to their sites. The regional-campus model replicates the experience of the original campus at an additional campus for the sake of making the services more accessible. The teaching-team model employs a team of ministers to facilitate services for multiple locations. The partnership model strategizes with local businesses or existing church facilities for the usage of a multi-site. And finally, the low-risk model is the

[155] Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 30-40.

process of evaluating new locations based upon low economic investment for the original site with potential for high evangelical growth.[156]

As mentioned before, there are other adaptations and variables to multi-site ministry. Much will hinge upon the administrative and missional structure of the local congregation. Brad House and Gregg Allison identify models of the multi-site church based on the foundational church structure. Their description of the models seems to be more adaptable in the rural context and is listed as follows: gallery, franchise, federation, cooperative, and collective.

To begin with, they add a stand-alone church as a pillar model. The pillar model is not a multi-site, but a single church with a single service. The gallery model is one church expanded to multiple services and/or venues. The franchise model is one church cloned to multiple sites. The federation model is one church contextualized in various locations. The cooperative model is one church made up of numerous interdependent churches. The collective model is a collection of churches collaborating as one. In addition to the multi-site models, they include a network model. The network model is made of individual churches joining together for a common goal and support, much like a denomination.[157]

Multi-site models and church planting have similarities. A multi-site ministry could morph into a church plant, both by accident or on purpose. If a ministry intends on extending her ministry through the mode of multi-site, yet the campus or location has its

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[156] Leadership Network, "Frequently Asked Questions about multi-site Churches," *Leadership Network*, n.d., https://leadnet.org/frequently_asked_questions_about_multi-site_churches/.

[157] Brad House and Gregg Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multi-site* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 48-49.

own vision, budget, leader, or board, it is not a multi-site; it is a new start church.[158] The multi-site model shares those things listed above. A church could also intend to plant a church and discover that a multi-site model would better serve the context.

Oppositions to Multi-site

Jonathan Leeman, in his book *One Assembly*, believes that the multi-site model is not a justifiable, biblical model. He even goes as far as providing practical ways for churches with multiple services times to return to one service. His dissertation on the word *ekklesia* goes beyond the simplistic definition of "church, assembly, or gathering." He inserts five categories of how the *ekklesia* could be interpreted or used in scripture:

1) *Gathering of Members*: "...the word ekklesia/assembly appears to be used with a view to the actual assembly or gathering."
2) *Members or Membership*: "...the word ekklesia appears to be used without a view to the act of assembling or gathering."
3) The word ekklesia could be in either category one or two.
4) *Universal Church*: The word ekklesia could "refer to the universal church, which I understand to be a heavenly and/or eschatological assembly."
5) *Gathering*: The word ekklesia can refer to a gathering.[159]

Of the five categories listed above, Leeman discovered more biblical references for categories one through four. Leeman opposes the multi-site church because he finds that the word *ekklesia* has a deeper biblical meaning than simply offering services in different locations. Much of the time, the Bible points to the temple gathering found in Jerusalem for festivals and worship, which evokes the

[158] Surratt, T*he Multi-Site Church Revolution,* 51.

[159] Jonathan Leeman. *One Assembly: Rethinking the multi-site and Multiservice Church Models*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 129-141.

gathering of the masses. A prime example of the event of Pentecost, or *Shavuot*, is where believers from around the world took their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

House and Allison, who advocate for multi-site ministry, recognize the opposition grounded in interpreting the word *ekklesia*. They write, "The New Testament authors regularly use the word to mean 'assembly.' Churches assembling together is essential to their identity as a group. The conclusion of the opposition to the multi-site model is that all church members must necessarily assemble together at the same time in the same location."[160] Then later, they dismiss the argument based on their version of orthopraxis saying, "Why spend time on this criticism? Those who advance it end up dismissing thousands of vibrant churches that are actively advancing the kingdom of God."[161]

Leeman operates under a different perspective of orthopraxis by asking a different set of questions:

> Multi-site advocates, by their very name, don't believe a gathering or assembly is an essential part of making a church a church. They haven't given due consideration to what the thrice-mentioned 'whole church' gathering in Jerusalem means or does or accomplishes. After all, if you believe that two campuses can never meet and still constitute one 'church,' then you don't think a gathering is a necessary element for making a church a church. You might insist the people gather somewhere. Fine. But the multi-site church itself is an 'assembly' that never assembles, a 'gathering' that never gathers, a 'church' that never churches.[162]

House and Allison affirm the criticism but again dismiss it, calling it "hypercriticism," stating, "Some see no need to come together, or they are too big to gather in one location

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[160] House, *MultiChurch,* 39-41.

[161] Ibid. 39-41.

[162] Leeman, *One Assembly,* 94.

because it is cost-prohibitive and logistically difficult to rent a facility in which the whole church can meet."[163]

Others have been critical of the complications the model poses in its methodology. Rany Pope was a pioneer of the multi-site ministry in the Atlanta, Georgia, area in the 1980s. In the 1990s, he shifted his strategy away from the multi-site model. He cited these three reasons for the shift: 1) The multi-site model made it difficult to preach and lead. 2) The multi-site model made it difficult to make a difference in each specific location. 3) The multi-site model made it difficult for the leader to be engaged locally.[164]

One final factor to mention in the criticism of the multi-site church is the vantage point of a congregationalist. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *congregationalism* is a movement of Christianity that "emphasizes the right and responsibility of each properly organized congregation to determine its own affairs, without having to submit these decisions to the judgment of any higher human authority. Each individual church is regarded as independent and *autonomous*."[165] Thomas Bartlett's doctoral dissertation on the rural multi-site model says this about his congregational movement and autonomy:

> The goal ultimately in a traditional church plant, is to release the church in mission or watch-care status to full autonomous church status with its own constitution and bylaws. In the multi-site model, this release is not the goal. This is where the tension lies. The multi-site model is of one pastor

[163] House, *MultiChurch,* 94.

[164] Randy Pope. "3 Reasons We Stopped Doing Multisite Church: It's Hard to Lead Locally from a Distance." *Leadership* 36, no. 3 (2015): 58–59.

[165] "Congregationalism | Protestant Movement." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Congregationalism.

> and church leadership directing multiple church locations, so the question of autonomy becomes central to the discussion.[166]

But most of the autonomy discussion about multi-site has less to do with the congregationalist movement and more to do with economic and practical reasons.

Leonard Blair interviews multiple pastors that are transitioning away from the multi-site ministry. He highlights the flaw of multi-site ministry when interviewing Paul Marzahn, senior pastor of Crossroads Church, stating, "There's an economic and just kind of practical aspect. The system is set up pretty much on the personality of one highly effective pastor, but if that highly effective pastor has any more issues or even dysfunction—depression, alcoholism—it can really shut down all the campuses."[167] This has been evident in many dynamic church leaders and planters where the church product is based upon a sole personality. Throughout our lifetime we have seen the unsustainability as the rise and fall of those congregations are based upon the top leader. Therefore, vital resources for sustainability and sabbath rest must be present in the life of a multi-site pastor.

Support for Multi-site

There are strengths and weaknesses in all models listed above, but is there biblical support for a multi-site church? Most of the argument is surrounded by questions that deal with orthodoxy and orthopraxy. "How are the gathered people of God biblically

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[166] Thomas Frank Bartlett. "Multi-site Church Planting in a Rural Community." (PhD diss., Temple Baptist Seminary), 2012.

[167] Leonard Blair. "Why Many Multi-site Churches Are Now Moving toward Autonomous Congregations." *The Christian Post*. Last modified May 12, 2019. https://www.christianpost.com/news/multi-site-churches-now-autonomous-congregations.html.

expressed through the Greek word *ekklesia*?" "What is the best practice for the local church to carry out God's mission?" In both questions, one will find support and opposition to the multi-site model. But it is not clear that the New Testament church accurately presented a multi-site church as represented today. Some speculate that the first-century church could be labeled multi-site due to evidence in the book of Acts. House states, "The very first Christian church was a multi-site church," and references house churches and temple locations.[168]

A theologian could study the word *ekklesia* and discover support in the biblical text. But to simply base biblical support upon a word study would ignore a holistic view of scripture altogether. Therefore, in addition to *ekklesia,* House writes, "The church was originally called 'the Way' (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), underscoring its association with Jesus, who himself is 'the way' (Jn 14:6). Biblical metaphors for the church include the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit."[169]

In the Wesleyan branch of Christianity, there is an interpretive method of scripture that helps strengthen the support of multi-site. The Wesley quadrilateral allows space to grapple with issues such as methodology in the church and how to live a holy life. Wesley's model had four points: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Although scripture may not give overwhelming evidence that multi-site ministry is supported, tradition, reason, and experience may lend a way. Traditionally, the protestant church has justified its existence and broke from the larger government or assembly since the

[168] House, *MultiChurch,* 31.

[169] Ibid. 40.

Reformation. Protestants have been free to create, structure, and organize to accomplish their mission without reserve, considering obvious scriptural prohibitions. For Brian Frye, the lens of reason and experience gives strong evidentiary support for multi-site. He lists three: 1) "reaching more people" with the gospel 2) "stewarding resources" (multiplying locations or congregations cost less than church planting), and 3) "multiplying ministries and leadership."[170]

Since 2011, the Church of the Nazarene has celebrated the local church's missional efforts through multi-site, multi-congregational, or organic church expressions. The Church of the Nazarene has labeled these expressions as "Parent Affiliated Congregations" or PAC. A PAC has a leader or pastor who is responsible for the pastoral care of the group and is connected with a parent church. The PAC designation was created to address the needs of churches beginning creative new congregations, who had no way of reporting those new works. Ethnic congregations, organic churches, and multi-sites are notable examples. Small group ministries have the potential to become PACs as well. Embracing PAC as a designation has become an important tool for identifying and celebrating groups and pastors who are new or previously unrecognized.[171]

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[170] Brian Nathaniel Frye. *The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America, 1950-2010* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

[171] "Parent Affiliated Congregations," USA/Canada Communications Center, Church of the Nazarene, n.d., https://www.usacanadaregion.org/sites/usacanadaregion.org/files/PDF/ParentAffiliatedCongregations.pdf.

The Rural Proposal

It is unrealistic to expect the church to make pastors or fulfill educational demands immediately. Suppose the Church of the Nazarene cannot instantly address the pastoral and educational deficiencies of our clergy. Are there other innovative ideas to explore to help our rural congregations during the pastoral shortage? For the rural context to survive, many denominations, including the Church of the Nazarene, have explored clergy sharing or the circuit model.

Multi-site innovation is not far off from the 18th and 19th-century Methodist roots of circuit riding. The creation of circuit riding preachers was in response to the need to reach isolated places during the earliest developments of the United States. A circuit consisted of two or more churches in which the circuit rider was expected to meet the "societies" or congregations once a year and possibly start new "societies." It would seem rare to only visit these places once a year, but the circuit would usually take up to six weeks to cover the trail.[172] The United Methodist Church records church membership of one million and 4,000 ministers that were riding circuits in 1844 compared to the 600 members and six ministers in 1771.[173] Today, we still see some of the shreds of evidence of the impact circuit ministry has on modern churches.

We cannot disregard many factors that led to the Colonial American itinerancy dying as a practice in Methodism. Itinerant pastors would work in varying communities accepting handouts to survive as their only source of income. Another one of the reasons

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[172] Robert Simpson, "Circuit Riders - GCAH," accessed September 14, 2022, http://www.gcah.org/history/circuit-riders.

[173] "The Hard Road of a Methodist Circuit Rider," The United Methodist Church, accessed September 14, 2022, https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-hard-road-of-a-methodist-circuit-rider.

is that the social dynamics near the end of the itinerancy age found congregants embarrassed to explain to their neighbors why their Methodist preachers moved so often. After all, their "social betters," the Episcopalians and Presbyterians, kept their ministers for long periods; even their social equals, the Baptists, did not have a new face in the pulpit annually. So the maximum time that Methodist clergy could remain in one parish appointment grew throughout the nineteenth century.[174]

In evaluating church planting and multi-site models, the question is whether or not a rural church should involve itself in either type of ministry. Wayne Schmidt uses these questions to evaluate if a church should get involved: "Are we located in a sizable city (50,000+ or having bedroom communities more than 20 minutes from our church?) Has God blessed us numerically so that we've grown beyond the 200 plateau?"[175] Most rural congregations will never be able to answer in the affirmative. The nature of rural churches are a flux of in and out disciple-making. It is really difficult for pastors to evaluate success and have a positive attitude about ministry impact with statistics as a guide. Surratt, on the other hand, demands that churches need to consider multi-site immediately because they are growing, and the model would save on the amounts of money that a facility-expansion program would entail.[176] Bartlett interviews senior pastors of multi-site churches in the rural context and asks for reasoning for multi-site for them. He writes:

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[174]John G. McEllhenney. "Itineracy Is Dead – but It Can Live Again." *Quarterly Review A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry* 23, no. 1 (2003): 177.

[175] Alan E. Nelson, ed., *The New Thing: Cutting-Edge Ideas for 21st Century Ministry from Progressive Leaders in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Scottsdale, AZ: Southwest Center for Leadership, 1998). 99.

[176] Surratt, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution,* 12.

> "The consensus among those surveyed was clear for the church, either change or die. One Senior Pastor exhorted the very words, 'We must keep changing.' Another senior leader summed it up by saying, 'God is bigger than one location.' One final motivation for multi-site mentioned was the aspect of good stewardship of resources. A multi-site church multiplies its resources numerous times, utilizing the creative energies of its planners, worship designers, graphics, and preachers, to a greater level than one-shot approach to weekend worship."[177]

These are positive, rational points made about reasons to embark upon the multi-site ministry. Although rational decisions should be considered in resource sharing or multi-site venturing, it fails for ecclesiological reasons.

Let us start with the obvious: for the rural church, the multi-site ministry is out of the imagination due to population and resources. The reality is that a rural church will plateau before the 200-members mark. But the question for multi-site should not end based upon membership, attendance, and finances, but rather about health. The health of a congregation should be evaluated at all times in the life of a church. The ecclesiological evaluation for health is not found in the statistical realm but rather by evaluating the Trinitarian discipleship. If a church can effectively and honestly assess her health, she can begin to dream and cast a vision for multi-site ministry. That also means a church needs to be honest−even if it is unhealthy and dysfunctional. Embracing Trinitarian theology helps congregations through times of dwindling resources. Even if a church finds itself in a negative evaluation, it should not disregard possibilities for partnerships. This may be the beginning of the discussion of multi-site partnerships for some rural churches.

The vision for the multi-site is to plant ministry where the mission is happening. But in the rural church, sometimes economic stressors are what will force the local

[177] Bartlett, "Multi-site Church Planting in a Rural Community," 55.

church to think creatively about how to do ministry effectively. According to George Garner, growth and life expectancy for the rural church is not about numbers either. He says, "Part of the struggle is due to a loss of vision for impacting their world for Jesus Christ. Many are fearful and are making decisions based on those fears. To begin to change the climate in the small church and to help move it to a more 'missional' mindset takes a lot of dedication and hard work."[178]

There are practical ideas that people have spent their lives caring for and studying the importance of rural church ministry. Glenn Daman is a minister in a rural context. He was born and raised on a farm and continues to find value in the rural congregation. In his book, *The Forgotten Church,* he recognizes the disregard the popular church has for the rural church. He acknowledges it on the leadership level as well. In pastor placement, new ministers usually get their first assignments in the rural context with the hopes of "graduating" to the city areas. He states, "The reasons that pastors overlook rural ministry are complex. The financial package the rural church offers, the lack of prestige, the lack of young pastors willing to go to rural areas, and the focus of seminaries and Bible colleges on urban ministries all contribute to the problem."[179]

Daman never alludes to the idea of multi-site ministry in the rural context but scratches the surface when he speaks about church partnerships in three levels of cooperative ministry: 1) Rural churches supporting each other's ministries. "For example, one church may provide quality children's ministries while another can focus upon the

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[178] North American Mission Board, ed., *Rural Church Planting: A Missional Footprint: A Collection of North American Strategies and Stories* (Alphaetta, GA: NAMB, SBC, 2011).

[179] Glenn Daman. *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America*, n.d. 226-227.

youth in the community." 2) Rural churches combine resources to work together to implement a program. "For example, rather than each church having a food bank, churches can form one large food bank in the local community that is accessible to everyone." 3) Rural churches can work with other churches and organizations to develop cooperative ministries to address the needs of communities. "For example, they can work together with the local school and sheriff's office to develop a comprehensive drug-prevention program for teens."[180] Between pastoral placement challenges and resource scarcity in the rural church, there is ample space for conversations about multi-site. Daman concludes, "Denominations and associations need to develop creative ways to provide financial support for those in rural ministry. Various options include shared pastors, satellite campuses, 'tent-making' pastors, the use of lay pastors, and other creative solutions."[181]

Multiple scenarios provide a way for the multi-site model to be considered. Therefore, a multi-site ministry for the rural community needs space for diversity in how it is conceptualized. The first is where a healthy rural congregation may consider starting a multi-site ministry in a nearby community. In the models stated previously, this would be a model where a "pillar" church sets out to duplicate its ministry where it previously did not exist. The model can manifest itself in the gallery, franchise, federation, cooperative, and collective models. These are branded models from Brad and Allison as previously stated.

[180] Ibid., 192-193.

[181] Ibid., 228.

The second scenario is where a healthy rural congregation may consider sharing a vocational pastor's resource with another rural church. Or an adaptation to this may be where the structure of pastoral sharing between two churches is not about one congregation being healthy and another struggling. As stated before, sometimes there are "birthing pains" to begin the process of the multi-site model due to the dysfunction of one church site. This model assumes a "take over" of a church that is already organized, yet needs a lifeline. Often, two or more congregations have already developed the sharing strategy where all assemblies involved depend on this structure. Many rural churches may not consider this a multi-site model, yet are already sharing pastors between two and three congregations. In the Wesleyan tradition, ministers who have more than one parish are historically titled "circuit riders." Other traditions call them dual parishes or multi-congregational churches. In today's denominational structures, this type of administrative takeover likely does not have the spirit of cooperation, but survival. But if this model is considered with the spirit of Trinitarian cooperation and God's mission, it could be a very healthy option.

The third scenario is where rural churches in proximity may consider a "collaborative" or a "network" model for their campuses for shared staffing and other potential resources. For the collaborative model to function, there seems to be a need to disband how the rural church administers itself. The collaborative model would call for the local congregations to participate in a unified structure where it is administratively and financially operated. When describing the network model, House states that it "is neither multi-site nor multi-church. Still, the network model is included on the spectrum because it shows a further step between a central authority and local congregations. A

network implies the concerted participation of individual churches that band together for a limited purpose."[182]

Multi-site ministry is the church expressed in multiple locations as a means that addresses ecclesial limitations within the rural context. The essential principle should be for a healthy, local congregation to share its resources in various locations. This definition is fundamental to multi-site church structures because of considering other adaptations. The CTN now groups this expression under the *Parent Affiliated Congregations* (PAC). The Church of the Nazarene has become more statically aware of the missional impact multi-site congregations have made by implementing an official designation of PACs. This official designation has allowed a numerical measuring tool for impact and reach. There are currently 103 ministers that oversee two or more churches in the CTN. Below is the breakdown.

Table 6.1. The Number of Pastors Serving Dual Congregations[183]

# of Pastors	Total Churches including PACs	# of PAC Churches
62	2	0
2	3	0
31	2	1
4	2	2
1	3	1
2	3	2
1	4	3

[182] House, *MultiChurch,* 72-73.

[183] These statistics in this table were provided via email by Laura Lance, Senior Programmer Analyst in Research Services with the Church of the Nazarene Research Center. Laura Lance, "Dual Pastor Research," 2022.

Based upon the research data from the Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 64 pastors serve two or more autonomic congregations. Thirty-nine Nazarene pastors fit in the PAC category that is engaging communities through the organic church, multi-site, multi-congregational, or new starts. Some of these expressions are reflected in Chapter 7 of this paper.

There are strengths and weaknesses to the multi-site model, but is there biblical, ecclesial support for a multi-site church? Does the church, as expressed in the multi-site method, fulfill God's mission through the church?

Many assume that the multi-site model is a separate venue where a church service is simulcast or streamed live in another location. But what if the multi-site model, when adapted to a rural context, is more than simply creating more worship venues in their context, but rather an undergirding of a sending and sharing mission of God? It is believed that the rural, multi-site model is a vehicle that creates creativity and imagination for a local congregation searching to be a part of what God is doing. But what if a rural church venturing into the multi-site venue is more about a collaboration of ideas and shared resources, rather than focused solely on worship services?

The rural proposal for the multi-site is to participate in a ministry where the mission is happening. It responds to the question, "How is God asking us to participate?" A "mother church" can adopt other rural congregations facing unique challenges in pastoral leadership, education, or financial crisis. The multi-site ministry can share personnel resources. It is also a vehicle to help a local congregation extend its ministry in surrounding communities where commuting for that community is not sustainable. For

the rural church, the vision in the multi-site model is addressing the dwindling vocational pastors, equipping the layperson for ministry, and sharing resources in a network of rural, culturally minded churches.

These are examples of Trinitarian missiology. It is church practices that encourage partnerships outside of the local institution. It involves the local congregation moving beyond their own imaginative reach and working in areas where boundaries were never meant to be created. Partnerships with nearby communities or established churches unleash a "newness" of imagination through the power of the Holy Spirit. This can be an example of how the Holy Spirit empowers the church to engage with the cultural setting and creatively strategize with other communities with innovative means.

Jesus's ministry mirrors the Father's mission to the world. In Matthew 25:15, Jesus shares his Olivet Discourse about the parable of the talents. It is a parable that is about God's Kingdom and his children. In this parable, the master gives five talents to one, two talents to another, and one talent to another "according to his ability." The one who was given five talents gained five more. The one with two gained two more talents. The servant who received one talent buried his talent where there was no increase. When it came time to settle their accounts, the one who did not invest his talent for any return received judgment. This is one of those stories that Jesus tells that has multiple implications. For the original hearers, we can suppose that Jesus was referring to the nation of Israel and God's intention to use them for his mission. If the master in the story is God and the talents represent the promise God made to Israel through Abraham, then the servant with the one talent may be the nation of Israel. Perhaps Jesus is stating, "This

promise that I have given you as a nation was meant to multiply and be a blessing to all others, but you buried it!"

Therefore, there are implications of Jesus's discourse for the church today. Jesus has redeemed the church through his work on the cross. He has empowered the church by sending the Holy Spirit. Yet he has also entrusted and elected the church with the good news of the Gospel. The church, like the servants of the master, is responsible for the master's wealth. Is the pronouncement upon the church judgment? Have we been good stewards of what God has entrusted to us? Or have we simply buried it?

Multiple factors have contributed to the decay and stagnation of the Western church. Commercialism, racism, political ideologies, and idolatry are a few contributing factors. The rural church is not immune to similar deficits as the rest of the Westernized church cultures. What it means to be "rural" is more than a geographical location but a combination of values, culture, and population. That context is a community that has an array of diversity in economics, education, and ethnicity, which makes it a ministry opportunity for the church. The rural communities have developed their unique undergirding of cultural theology. The rural churches and their leaders need a prophetic voice and a firm grasp of their community's cultural identities. Their leaders need to know how to adapt to those cultural changes. The faith community needs to comprehend and affirm the shifting changes in their context. Gleder and Zscheile explain the tension of innovation and adaptation within particular mission orient churches, writing:

> The challenge is that the church can easily fall into two ditches on either side of faithful contextualization: *over-contextualization* and *under-contextualization*. What is it about the church that, on the one hand, it can be so creative and innovative in seeking out new opportunities for ministry, and, on the other hand, that it can so often be reactive and

> resistant to change? How are we to understand these dimensions as being part of the same church of Jesus Christ?[184]

For the Western, rural church to carry out God's mission, it will need to recapture or rediscover its identity as a "sent people for God's mission." In other words, the church will have to embrace a missional mindset to "camp" in the places where the mission is happening. Those places are where those that are disconnected, marginalized, and displaced from the faith and the organized church. For reasons stated in the introduction of this paper, the rural context is a people who are disconnected, marginalized, and displaced. Therefore, there is no need to be preoccupied with the justification of the presence and influence of God's church in rural settings.

But the rural church will need to reimagine its mission and administrative practices. To begin, we will have to ask the right questions. Up to this point, asking the questions "Who is God? What is He up to? How is He asking us to participate?" has given the conversation a good starting point to measure or discover the purpose of the church for the mission of God. The discovery within these questions should inform the church's structure and how we operate in a Trinitarian way. Creating a community of faith that asks these questions will better inform the localized expression of the mission. These questions will characterize a church's intention for a multi-site endeavor. The best question to evaluate their intention would be: "Does the multi-site endeavor remain faithful to the Trinitarian theology?"

Therefore, if the rural church dares to venture into the multi-site movement, the Trinitarian framework needs to be considered. Affirming the Trinity is not merely

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[184] Van Gelder, *Participating in God's Mission,* 48-49.

developing gatherings at different sites. A church that anchors its theology in the Trinity will have an ecclesiology actively participating in sending and sharing. It will send all available resources to fulfill its pursuits. Wright says of the Trinitarian sending and sharing nature of God, "Churches, then, are to be communities around the world, planted, nurtured, and connected through ministries of sending, going, and supporting - for the sake of the name of Christ and the truth of the gospel."[185] Therefore, if the church sees itself as the sending church, she takes her ecclesial cues from the triune God. The rural church needs to be satisfied with the sending and sharing nature of the church. Again, it is the ministry of God that sends. The rural church will struggle with sending or sharing lay people and resources because of the fears of scarcity. But if the rural church has an undergirding of Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology, they will find themselves using that as an instrument to measure its effectiveness.

Lesslie Newbigin submits to the church to pay close attention to the administrative structures within the institution. If the church is to participate in the renewing work of the Triune God, then issues such as worship, leadership, and ecclesial structures must be brought into line with the missionary identity of the church.[186] This statement has heavy implications for a church venturing into the multi-site arena. One can conclude that Newbigin is encouraging the church to be creative in cultural norms. He impresses upon the multi-site model to consider its existence behind shifting cultures but never to embark on existing for itself.

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[185] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 221.

[186] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 105.

Wright also describes an indirect version of a network of supporting churches that stemmed from the "mother church" in Jerusalem. Other churches, such as Antioch and Philippi, took on this missionary identity by supporting financially and sending and sharing personnel. This is a great example of the methodology of the structure of a multi-site model. The multi-site church has historically started with a "mother church." It begins with a healthy local body that identifies a geographical location, culture, or mission and is sent there to do the mission. Stephanie A. Lowery proposes a great prescriptive statement to the churches that can inform the multi-site model to be "the adoptive children of God, who are a community of Spirit-led apprentices gather for worship and training to continue Christ's mission in the world."[187]

If the multi-site church is the expression of *ekklesia*, she cannot reduce her name simply as those who gather, but rather as how the activity of the triune God participates. As for Newbigin, the word *ekklesia* has rich implications that can be applied to the multi-site model. He identifies *ekklesia* as a church that is gathered and scattered. The word should imply that the nature of the church is always being sent and going forth. It begins as a local congregation that morphs into a congregation elsewhere. He states, "The word 'church,' or ekklesia, is used in the New Testament always to describe the visible communities of humans in two senses: (1) local congregations and (2) the entire people that belong to Jesus Christ."[188] The rural culture cannot be a church for only those that fit nicely into a rural category. The church must be a global-minded existence. According to

[187]Green, *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue*, 87.

[188] Lesslie Newbigin, "1984 The Basis and the Forms of Unity: Second Peter Ainslie Lecture – Newbigin Resources," 7.

Goheen, the multi-site church in the rural context will struggle with the question: "How can people see the church as the expression of the one new humankind across time and place as it becomes incarnated in many places?"[189] If the multi-site church already thinks of the church in many places without thinking globally, then it fails the missional and Trinitarian test, and it only exists for itself. The rural church needs to continue the missional and triniarian mindset long after it is sent. The mission does not end after it is duplicated in another geographical location, but rather it begins the Trinitarian dance all over again.

Circuit-riding ministry is not an archaic methodology irrelevant to our current rural climate. It can be a signpost of congregations grappling with the concept that the Church is one with a God who is one. Multi-site cannot be about autonomy but discipleship that leads to evangelism. It cannot be diluted into preaching points. If the imaginative possibilities are limited due to financial limitations and statistics, then a good place to begin for pastors and leadership is Trinitarian theology. A healthy understanding of the triune Godhead's activity within the church and the world as a foundation should open up a newness of imagination. Multi-site, PAC expressions, and circuit ministry may not be the product of a healthy undergirding of rural theology. The product might simply be a better understanding of the role of the rural congregation during the post-Christian world.

[189] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 107.

CHAPTER 7

RURAL MODELS OF RESOURCE SHARING

In the book of Numbers, Chapter 2, there is a detailed description of how the Lord wanted the tribes of Israel to arrange themselves whenever they camped around the Tent of Meeting. This arrangement is significant because it represents the Church of God in its beauty and balance according to its many parts that encompass the abiding presence of the Resurrected Christ. Whenever a church thinks theologically about ministry, we should be aware that the Trinitarian Godhead is the center of our ideology and methodology of ministry. Whenever we think about the uniqueness and resources that congregations are equipped with within a small radius, it is easy to see the greatness that those qualities flesh themselves out to embody the *Missio Dei*.

The examples given within this chapter are stories of churches that shared resources with other local congregations out of necessity or out of innovation. These are contextual stories and are not used as models for best practices. But rather they are examples of both the reward and struggles within the rural church context that share spaces, pastors, and other resources. Some of the stories are of rural churches filled with the tension of self-preservation, while others echo Trinitarian cues regardless of the need or circumstance. Some will echo images of Trinitarian theology through resource sharing,

and some reflect modelistic theology through self-preservation. Both examples can help us understand both tensions. These are a collection of ethnographic and narrations within the rural church context.

Watonga & Okeene, Oklahoma

At the 2015 Oklahoma District Assembly, District Superintendent Dr. Terry Rowland challenged the abiding affiliate churches to "Dream About 2020" and what local churches could do with their resources by that time. The Watonga Church of the Nazarene felt the burden of planting a church by 2020 but lacked the knowledge of where to begin. Through the leadership of the Oklahoma District Advisory Board and the Oklahoma District Church of the Nazarene, a vision was provided through a workshop called "Churches Planting Churches" on the campus of Southern Nazarene University in the fall of 2015. The call to plant a church was amplified by presenter Bill Weisman when stating, "The greatest form of evangelism today is Church Planting." Rev. Nathan Twyman (the pastor of Isabella CTN at the time) and Rev. Kason Oakes (the pastor of Watonga CTN) felt the need to explore the idea of planting a church in Okeene, Oklahoma. Okeene has a population of 1,557 and has a 25-mile driving distance to Watonga, Oklahoma, and a 9-mile driving distance to Isabella, Oklahoma.

By 2016, the Isabella and Watonga Church of the Nazarene churches made simple sacrifices and began efforts to plant a church. The first service was held in the Okeene Masonic Lodge on Saturday, March 19, 2016, with numerous guests from the District, Watonga CTN, Isabella CTN, and unchurched folks looking for a congregation to call

home. The Okeene Masonic Lodge chapter offered their facilities rent-free, but no long-term plan was facilitated.

By the end of April, services began and were conducted as a preaching point at the Okeene Public Park. Saturdays became challenging for volunteers; therefore, services were moved to Sunday evenings. As summer months came, so did the storm season. It posed different threats and challenges to sound equipment and overall safety due to the threat of storms and high temperatures. On September 15, 2016, a used army tent was donated to the cause, and we moved the service to a volunteer's lawn adjacent to the bright lights of the local high school football field. Many attending services in Okeene felt like this was a momentum shift as the Okeene church was more visible to the public and interests grew. In 2017, the Church of God Anderson in Okeene stopped conducting services within their facilities and placed the parsonage and church up for sale. After two years of being on the market, the Church of God Anderson gifted their facilities to the Oklahoma District Church of the Nazarene for their ministry efforts in Okeene, Oklahoma.

Today, the ministry efforts in Okeene look a little different than the initial autonomy plan. Isabella encountered multiple pastoral changes, which naturally left the ministry responsibilities upon the Watonga CTN. Therefore, an evaluation of an autonomous church plant was shifted to a multi-site expression. Watonga's pastor has the vocational role of discipleship, administration, and pulpit ministry. However, Okeene is now an expression of Watonga, and Watonga is an expression of Okeene. Both share a financial budget, pastoral staff, and a larger connection of believers as a proximity network.

Okeene and Watonga have similar cultural, economic, and age demographics within these rural type communities. There are differences in population sizes and growth that should be an area of interest. Since 2016, the Watonga CTN has absorbed the statistical benefits of the ministry efforts in Okeene.

Table 7.1. Watonga and Okeene Comparative Growth Rate

Location	2014	2019	2024 (Projected)	Growth Rate
Watonga, OK[190]	5,150	4,504	4,409	-2.6%
Okeene, OK[191]	1,342	1,557	1,585	3.0%

The interest in ministry, outreach, or a church plant in Okeene can be considered due to the increase in population over the past five years. Since Okeene has a smaller population than Watonga, the assumption would be that ministry is not worth the effort. These stats show that Okeene has some economic growth and an upward trend in population. Most smaller rural communities have a downward trend in population growth.

With the knowledge of the population growth within the Watonga community, we will discover if there is any correlation between population growth and worship attendance growth. Population statistics are given in increments of five years from the research center at nazarene.org.

Table 7.2. Five Year Watonga Comparative Growth Rate to Worship Attendance[192]

[190] COTN, "Annual Report: Watonga Church of the Nazarene."

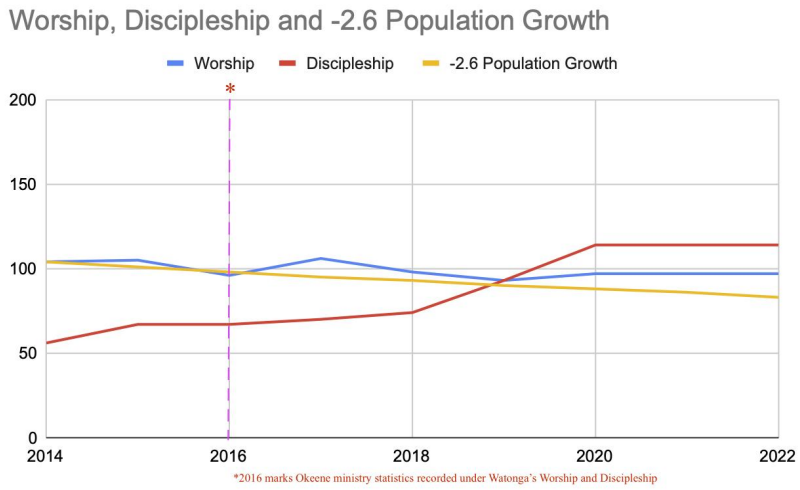
[191] Church of the Nazarene, "Annual Report: Okeene Church of the Nazarene" (Kansas City, MO, 2022).

[192] COTN, "Annual Report: Watonga Church of the Nazarene."

Title	2014	2019	2024 (Projected)	Growth Rate
Watonga, OK	5,150	4,504	4,409	-2.6%
Watonga CTN Worship Attendance	104	93	83	-2.21%
Watonga CTN Discipleship Attendance	56	93	154	66%

Using the five-year data provided on the population, growth does accurately depict the story of the combined ministry efforts between Watonga and Okeene. A better depiction and more interesting detail will be from taking yearly statistics from 2014 compared to a -2.6% population growth of Watonga.

Figure 7.3. Yearly Worship, Discipleship, and -2.6 population growth[193]



The statistics show that the efforts made between ministry presence in both Watonga and Okeene have given attendance numbers in worship a flatter curve. With the population decline in Watonga, innovation needed to occur within the realm of ministry. As shown

[193] Ibid.

above, attendance was on track with a population growth rate of -2.6%. The local congregation cannot change the population trends or economy. Therefore partnerships for broader ministry reach are being considered. The 66% increase in discipleship ministry directly correlates with those partnerships. Lay members in Okeene and Watonga are hosting small groups and bible studies. Both locations have their own local Vacation Bible School and discipleship classes. One can conclude that the efforts have impacted statistical attendance for both worship and discipleship ministries.

Understanding the labor forces between the two communities will help understand the culture and what drives the local economy. It also can help understand if efforts should be made within the community for worship services or offer opportunities for commuting to worship. The question that Watonga CTN considered is: "If Okeene is 25 miles away, why can't they drive to our already established services?"

Table 7.4. Travel Time to Work[194]

	<10 mins	10-14 mins	15-19 mins	20-29 mins	30-44 mins	45-59 mins	>60 mins
Watonga, OK (961 commuters) (28.1% total population are commuters)	40.6%	8.4%	15.4%	5.8%	16.0%	1.1%	12.6%
Okeene, OK (719 commuters) (45.4% total population are commuters)	60.9%	8.9%	7.2%	14.6%	3.3%	2.8%	2.2%

These statistics will help us understand why someone from Watonga would wonder why efforts cannot be made for Okeene to be a commuter regarding worship. The culture of Watonga tends to trend toward a commuter lifestyle, while Okeene tends to have local

[194] "Church of the Nazarene | Community Demographics " (2019).

jobs. Therefore, the expectation of Okeene to commute to the established location in Watonga should be minimized if we understand this dynamic.

As of the 2022-2023 fiscal year, communications began with the neighborhood Okeene United Methodist Church as a possible merger between the Okeene congregation and the Methodist congregation. Okeene UMC voted to disaffiliate from their denomination due to the deep conflict surrounding issues of human sexuality and is seeking affiliation with a Wesleyan denomination. This merger is yet to be realized, but an openness to more partnerships for the mission of God can only expand our local imagination.

It would be unrealistic for the expectation of the church's missional work within the community of Okeene to have a large number of members. But as stated before, numerical statistics can no longer be what measures significant ministry. Watonga Church of the Nazarene, receiving missional cues from a sharing and sending God, only secures its identity in a shrinking populated community. It helps the church realize that its resources can be multiplied and extended to nearby, smaller communities that need its presence.

Watonga & Hinton, Oklahoma, Lutheran Parishes

Watonga has sixteen known organized churches, three of which have full-time clergy. The local Lutheran congregation shares a pastor with an adjacent community. This partnership between Lutheran congregations was not made out of the desire to plant, but rather to salvage. Orville Peters recently completed his ordination in June of 2021. Peters

serves in a dual parish between Saint John Lutheran of Hinton, Oklahoma (35 miles from Watonga) and Mount Calvary Lutheran Church of Watonga.

Orville worked as a "lay youth pastor" for many years while his children were growing up in a nearby community called Kingfisher, Oklahoma, approximately 35 miles from Watonga. Peters became the pastor of Watonga Mount Calvary in 2019 when another nearby Lutheran church had a vacancy. Orville expressed that the reason why he feels like he is assigned this role is that he is in his "second career." He gets benefits from his retirement and says, "I am cheap." He admits that both congregations are struggling and are suited to play the role of "life support." Peters said that most of his time in the community is spent in his office preparing for Bible studies and Sunday services. Every once in a while, he will schedule a time to take his guitar and sing at the Senior Citizen's Center.

When asked about the overall health of the community, Pastor Orville was fixated on the decline of the population in the past decade. To his knowledge, "The town has issues with drug usage and poverty." Peters says, "Our church really needs to start doing more community outreach and events. I believe the church, if we were more community-oriented, would help with some of these issues in our town, but we have little to no help."

The majority of the time in the interview was spent on the topic of the presence and role of faith organizations within Watonga. He believes that there are many strong churches within Watonga, but not many are "growing." He says, "What we need is a revival." He wanted to clarify what he meant by "revival." He stated, "The way I look at it, we got to revive ourselves down here. I have to remind people what I mean by revival

is we don't have to do the things we used to do." Peters could not articulate a particular vision, but he was looking for something organically from his congregation. He wanted a revival happening in the people within the Mount Calvary Church.

The partnerships between churches in crisis or on the verge of closing can create a lack of vitality and imagination. A congregation embraces a dual parish model as a "last resort" because it lacks the imagination that resource sharing can create. It is a "last resort" in attitude because all other efforts to be autonomists have been exhausted. Many autonomist church leaders find it challenging to look beyond the ability to pay bills and continue traditions because church practices have not reflected Trinitarian practices before the local crisis.

Jet and Helena, Oklahoma, Churches of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene of Jet, Oklahoma, is nestled near the Oklahoma State Park of The Great Salt Plains with a population of 2,445. It was 1979 the last time the church reported average attendance of worship over 30.[195] For the past five years, it has teetered around ten people for corporate worship. The CTN of Helena, Oklahoma, is just a short 13-mile drive south of Jet, Oklahoma. Helena has a similar population of 2,812. For the past 30 years, Helena CTN reported strong corporate worship statistics averaging 30-40 people.[196]

In 1992, the Jet CTN struggled to pay its local budgets and allocations, let alone support full-time clergy. During that time, the remaining church members engaged in

[195] "General Secretaries Annual Report: Jet Church of the Nazarene" (Kansas City, MO, 2022).

[196] "General Secretaries Annual Report: Helena Church of the Nazarene" (Kansas City, MO, 2022).

conversations with the formerly known Northwest Oklahoma District CTN to seek direction for the current and future of their autonomous congregation. The reality of staying autonomous was beyond challenging, and the Jet congregation sought to share pastoral personnel with the nearby congregation of Helena CTN, with Rev. Dean Holt taking the circuit position as he was already pastor of Helena CTN.

After a 30-year circuit ministry tenure, Rev. Dean Holt retired and made the position vacant. Rev. Steve Brown inherited the circuit in 2022, after moving from Cleveland, Oklahoma. After five months of observing and practicing in this context, he believed he could better reflect on the innovation and challenges within this pastoral arrangement.

Brown has served in the ministry for over a decade in the rural context. He pursued the call to full-time vocational ministry later in his life. He is a 2006 graduate of Nazarene Bible College (NBC). He believes that NBC equipped him to minister in the rural context and prepared him to be able to think theologically. Brown stated that it would be challenging to handle not only theological concepts but also practical pastoral leadership without NBC and continuing education. He says, "NBC gave me a passion for the Word of God and helped me understand how to exegete passages and the community. We have to be able to think deeper than the arrogance that can come with the gifting of the Holy Spirit. We need to rely upon the community support that comes from higher learning."

Brown reflected upon his five months of navigating the circuit between Jet and Helena, saying, "Regardless of how I feel about the current ministry arrangement between Jet and Helena, 'stand-alone' is a problematic concept in the rural context. Most

of the rural challenges stem from isolation." Brown believes there is a gap between how the CTN understands the city and urban core ministry versus rural. Many of the city congregations enjoy the luxury of "proximity fellowship." In juxtaposition, rural congregations, by default, are forced into autonomous ministry strategies.

For the ministry arrangement between Jet and Helena, Brown feels that the greatest deficit of the shared pastorate is a lack of discipleship. He states, "Because I cannot stay behind after services, I'm always rushing to the next, discipleship falls behind. I believe in relationship discipleship that leads to evangelism. If we fail to disciple the people attending the circuit services, we are simply preaching points, which fails the church's ministry."

Brown believes both congregations have a better grasp on their own history and traditions as individual, autonomous churches than a firm grasp on their mission in partnership with God. Brown states, "A better understanding of the mission of God will work in favor of the partnership between Jet and Helena. Traditions only work against it." As long as traditions undercut the practices of Jet and Helena, Brown will have to navigate the tensions of Jet versus Helena. Although this arrangement has worked for over 30 years, the goal seems to be about autonomy rather than mission. He states, "You can hear it (autonomy) in the undertones that their pastor isn't 'wholly ours' when they think of sharing their pastor."

The resources that help Brown within his church context, he expresses to be bilingual because he speaks "English and Okie." It is necessary to be able to speak the language of the rural community to thrive. Brown stated, "It appears that much of our denominational publication is geared toward the city and urban areas because it is

difficult to get our hands on literature that translates in the rural context." It would be a valuable resource to the rural community if there were literature available with language adaptable to the rural context. Another area that was discussed was that the CTN structure can sometimes be a hindrance in the rural context. The strife that comes with autonomy in the rural context stifles innovation. For example, Brown spoke of the possible innovation of developing an area Nazarene coalition. This coalition would encompass surrounding rural areas with declining populations and staff this coalition to help in the ministry endeavors. But no denominational structure allows churches to morph into mission-type churches. For Brown, it seems as if it is a death threat to both the local congregation and the denomination.

The interview with Rev. Steve Brown helps us see that a dual-parish model can be hopeful when approached with strong missiological enfaces. There will be tensions of tradition and theology that dual-parish pastors must tread. It affirms that leaders need to help establish a theological foundation for the rural church. Theological foundations will withstand the ebbs and flows of the rural culture long before the local church traditions. Brown also reminds us that multi-site cannot be simple preaching points to establish the health of the rural church, but empowering the church to make disciples that lead to evangelizing the communities in which they are planted.

Circuit Riding Youth Ministry

It is challenging for many rural churches with limited resources to provide quality programming and/or a staff member to fulfill the duties of a full-time youth ministry.

Mainline Protestant churches in a rural context are more likely to use their senior pastor or volunteer staff to organize and run youth meetings than any other denomination. Only about 13 percent of mainline Protestant churches in rural settings have the resources to supply a full-time salary for their youth worker. One might conclude that rural churches do not need to offer youth programming due to the congregation's lack of numbers. Regardless of the size of a rural church in the United States, 90 percent offer youth programming within their congregation. Of that 90 percent offering youth programming are also ministering to one-third of adolescent students that choose to attend American-affiliated religious activities.[197] Therefore, the validity behind youth ministry is not in question with most rural congregations; the question comes from the resources that power that ministry.

Multi-church youth programming, both within and among denominations, can benefit youth ministry. Some of the benefits include sharing resources, creating enthusiasm, and offering flexibility.[198] Ecumenically shared youth programming has the potential to foster social capital by building bridges among people of varying class, ethnic, and religious lines.[199] Thus, local congregations have explored a model of itinerant or circuit-riding youth ministry. This is a shared ministry with two churches as a form of "circuit-riding" associate ministry, its relationship to youth ministry and Wesleyan polity, and implications for continued implementation in other shared associate settings.

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[197] Gary A. Goreham. "Denominational Comparison of Rural Youth Ministry Programs." *Review of Religious Research 45*, no. 4 (2004): 336. Based upon a random study done of 400 rural churches from 8 denominations throughout the United States.

[198] Rick Chromey, *Youth Ministry in Small Churches* (Loveland, CO: Group Books, 1990), 87.

[199] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). 48.

Youth ministry, in itself, is unique in that, by its nature, it involves an adaptation to a traditional sense of ministry. In the rural communities of Dewey County, Oklahoma, two churches, Camp Creek and Vici Church of the Nazarene, merged their youth organizations by combining their resources to fund and support a youth ministry in their rural setting. These two churches are of the same denomination and have 10 miles of road that separate them. In the practical sense, the two churches alone can reach families within a varying 15-20 mile radius, respectively. Together, they reach families that live within most of the county's communities. Each congregation has unique talents, and resources on its own. Still, in the preliminary meetings between the senior pastors of both congregations, there was an obvious observation of the contrast of inventory in each church. Of those contrasts, it was apparent that combining those resources could have a profound impact on the mission of reaching students with the Gospel message in the church's ministry context. Of the inventory, Camp Creek CTN's assets included: finances that could allow them to hire only a part-time youth pastor, a half-court gymnasium facility, and a church board willing to reach students for Christ no matter which organization got the credit. Vici CTN's assets included: finances that could allow them to hire only a part-time youth pastor, youth parsonage housing, 15 passenger van, and a church board willing to reach students for Christ no matter which organization got the credit.

The idea behind formulating responsibilities of a "circuit riding" youth pastor can be complex if each church involved expects the employee to attend every church event, such as Sunday school, fellowship dinners, and even Sunday morning services. Although the churches should expect the associate to attend worship services on Sunday mornings,

it is an unrealistic expectation for an employee to be in two places at once. This is why it was implemented to treat this vocation as the church would treat a supported missionary as an extension of the church's mission beyond the four walls of the building. In this approach, it gives the associate the responsibility of working alongside two Nazarene Youth International Presidents that serve on each church board as an advocate for the merged organization that reports on the involvement, needs, and financials of the combined account of the ministry.

Guymon & Hooker, Oklahoma

The church should believe that God is doing a new thing (Is 43:19). Can God do a new thing in that community? Can a vital church like the Guymon Church of the Nazarene breathe life into a self-diagnosed church that needs to be resuscitated? "Half of the population is now Hispanic." This is most likely uttered by the white population of Hooker, Oklahoma. It is a perception of boomer lifetime citizens of this small community in the panhandle of Oklahoma. The reality is that the Hispanic community only makes up thirty percent of the population, and the rate of US citizenship is at its all-time high of ninety percent.[200] To their credit, the Latino and Hispanic community has increasingly sought Hooker as a "sanctuary" community to discover jobs and citizenship in the past two decades.

Beef and pigs drive the economy in Hooker as the industry employs many, and it is not a burden to travel for employment. Hooker, Oklahoma is tucked twenty miles between Liberal, Kansas, and Guymon, Oklahoma. Liberal is home to the National Beef

[200]"Hooker, OK" Data, USA, (2020), https://datausa.io/profile/geo/hooker-ok.

packing plant. Guymon has Seaboard Foods, which is a pork packing plant. Most people live in Hooker and commute to their jobs in nearby cities because “people enjoy the safety and small community that Hooker offers,” states Karla Huxman.

Hooker Church of the Nazarene was organized in 1921 and celebrated its centennial in 2021. As described, the church's organization is hanging on by a tiny thread and needs life support. Since 2002, the Hooker CTN’s membership has been in rapid decline losing 111 members to 5 official members. Hooker CTN has a core group of nine faithful parishioners, but they struggle to engage their community. In the past decade, the church has struggled to pay the bills to keep a church building. Therefore, in 2019, the remaining church members decided to sell the church building to the public school system for a preliminary educational facility. As they have done so, they used the parsonage basement for worship services. The congregation got to a financial breaking point and had to let their pastor know that they could not afford his salary or the parsonage utilities. The remaining congregants decided to move forward as an organized congregation. Their church board extended Hale’s stay in the parsonage until he could find his next pastoral assignment, as they planned to sell the property.

With the decision to close the church, the Oklahoma District Church of the Nazarene evaluated different options to observe signs of salvation for the ministry of the CTN in Hooker, Oklahoma. The option that seemed most agreeable was a resource shared with the Guymon CTN, 23 miles southwest of Hooker. With the direction of the District Superintendent, Dr. Terry Rowland of the Oklahoma District CTN, Guymon CTN was asked to nurture the Hooker congregation in whatever means they felt they could offer. In the beginning, it was a group of 5-7 Nazarenes on any given Sunday

meeting at the local senior center for worship services. Craig Shepperd has been the Guymon church pastor for over two years and is considered one of the most vital churches in the Oklahoma district. Craig met with the congregation to discuss appropriate support offered by the Guymon church. Craig states:

> I have met with the Hooker church a few times, once to preach on a Sunday morning and another time during the week to discuss the future of the Hooker church. We discussed possible options. One option was merging our congregations, which was not met with enthusiasm. The second option was for someone from our church to fill the pulpit every Sunday. It was no surprise to me that option was what they wanted to explore. There are some challenges and some tough questions that they will need to have to answer for themselves to survive and be relevant: What is the mission of the Hooker church? Are there any changes that need to be made to reach new believers? Because when I asked those questions, I was mainly met with a blank stare and was told that they wanted to make sure whatever happened that they at least wanted to sing only hymns and have a preacher on Sunday because that is just the way it has always been done.

Karla Huxman was born, raised, and continues to live in Hooker, Oklahoma. She is 52 years old and works at the local high school for accounts payable. She is also a lifetime member of the Church of the Nazarene in Hooker. She was baptized, married, and discipled within this body of believers. Karla was asked about the history of the Hooker church. She gave facts about the building and recent dwindling attendance. When asked about her emotions about her history with the Hooker church and its current situation, she was overcome with tears. She says, “It is sad to see it the way it is because that is where I was baptized; I got married in that church, where we raised our children to know the Lord.”

With a community of roughly two thousand people, there is an assumption that a portion of that population is not affiliated with a congregation. When made aware of this

perception of her community, Huxman deflected, “We really don’t know anyone that isn’t already affiliated with a congregation, and if they aren’t, then they are probably Mexican. Half our town has become populated with Mexicans.”[201] Karla’s mother, Lorretta Hoobler, was sitting next to her during this FaceTime interview. Karla looked over to her and nodded to Loretta to affirm her statement, followed by a tender gaze to consult each other because of the lack of hope within their thoughts.

There seems to be a misunderstanding about the possible partnership between Guymon and Hooker. The conversations are immature in developing any conclusions for either party. Asking to reflect upon recent discussions with the Guymon church, she states, “I don’t know what their intentions are or how they will help us. I guess we could attend their church and fellowship with them, but we believe we can still have a church here in Hooker.” What has Guymon offered in the form of help to the Hooker church? Karla said, “I guess they are willing to send a preacher to conduct our services, and they want us to come fellowship with them one Sunday a month.” Is there anything positive that the church can cling to that has happened recently? Karla states that a new couple has been attending and is interested in membership. Karla was asked, “If you had a dream for the Hooker church, what would it be?” Karla says, “I guess in order to grow, we have to get more people, but all of us are over 50 years old, and we are tired.” It was difficult to evaluate the strength of the future of the local body based on the feeling that Karla was already in the postmortem. Karla found it challenging to think of ministry outside of the number of people attending and money in the bank.

[201] Karla Huxman used the term “Mexican” to identify the Hispanic community in Hooker. There was no derogatory intent.

In 2022, three years into the partnership, a new vision has taken place. Not only has a multi-site worship service been established in the basement of the Hooker CTN parsonage, but a fresh expression of discipleship has taken place. The Oklahoma District CTN gave a $10,000 grant to this partnership for the purchase of a food truck after the Guymon CTN pastoral staff submitted a business plan. "The Hub Collective" is a mobile food truck that produces high-quality espresso and coffee drinks and barbeque in Texas County, Oklahoma. Through this business venture, Guymon hopes to build bridges between the church, the Hooker community, and the college community of Goodwell, Oklahoma, which is a small town located 10 miles southwest of Guymon. It is home to the fastest-growing college in the region for the last four years, Oklahoma Panhandle State University.

This food truck's primary route will be in Hooker and Goodwell where 10% of all proceeds will go to the ministry of Hooker CTN. According to "The Hub Collective" business plan, "The target audience is primarily students and teachers of Hooker public school, surrounding Hooker businesses, and OPSU college students." It offers "vocational training and life skills to low-income individuals and college students." The goal is to "utilize the selling of coffee as a connection point to build bridges between the church and the community. While this will initially be accomplished in Hooker and Goodwell, we hope that it will grow to help Guymon CTN connect to the community in Guymon through special events and community engagement."[202]

[202] Nathan Jenkins, "Hub Business Plan," August 12, 2021, 1, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YOJ6xykvc2N3BJn-JVECqMLR_y4BtQ6CutxOUU27o1U/edit?usp=sharing.

Much like Jet and Helena CTN, the partnership between Hooker and Guymon CTN are on the fringes of survival or innovation. There is also the sense that ministry to cultures outside the predominantly white community would be outside their dreaming capacity. There seems to be a lack of Trinitarian understanding of the mission of God through the Hooker CTN within its remaining members. It will be the vocation of the Guymon CTN to surrogate life and vision of the Trinitarian measure. There is also room for discernment if the Hooker church needs to die, they need to die well. If the remaining members capture a Trinitarian vision, God can do immeasurably more than they can ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within them (Eph 3:20).

Pastor Todd Derbyshire and Crosspoint Church of the Nazarene

Crosspoint Church of the Nazarene, formally known as River Oaks Church of the Nazarene, has been adapting their facilities since the conception of a YMCA in River Oaks, Texas. An Air Force Major had a vision for the Church of the Nazarene to have a ministry presence for personnel serving the Carswell Air Force Base. Since its humble beginnings in a YMCA, the congregation has seen multiple shifts in scenery, buildings, and shared spaces. In 63 years, they have built new facilities from the ground up, traded buildings with other congregations, and even relocated to a different zip code. In 2006, the West Texas District Church of the Nazarene, under the direction of District Superintendent Dr. Charles Jones made an offer to the formerly known River Oaks Church to purchase the church facilities along with one of the three houses owned by the church. The idea behind the offer was to bring the congregation from Templo Doulos Church of the Nazarene, a Hispanic congregation, to the River Oaks location. In addition

to a Hispanic Nazarene Church, the River Oaks location would serve as a training center for Hispanic pastors and headquarters for Hispanic outreach across the West Texas District.[203]

Crosspoint has become a center for improvisation when it comes to innovative ministry. Gregory Jones believes that the heart of the Wesleyan tradition is not to innovate for change's sake, but that which is connected to the past. He states:

> Traditioned innovation is a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in creative tension, a habit of being that depends on wise judgment, requiring both a deep fidelity to the patterns of the past that have borne us to the present and a radical openness to the changes that will carry us forward. Our feet are firmly on the ground with our hands open to the future.[204]

As one goes through the history books, you can see that the core DNA of adapting to cultural shifts and changes is at the heart and heritage of Crosspoint.

In 2015, Todd Derbyshire inherited Crosspoint Church of the Nazarene as pastor to a congregation full of affluence. Derbyshire states that the Crosspoint people had laymen and women that were doctors, scientists, admirals, and lawyers. Within the first year of his pastoral stent, the surrounding area experienced a dramatic shift in culture, economics, and diversity. According to Derbyshire, the locals now consider North Fort Worth a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities. Crosspoint was not immune to the shifting changes as the core members of this congregation relocated. Derbyshire says, "After building Crosspoint's facility to its new home, there was so much change that

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[203] "History," crosspointnaz.org, 2015, https://crosspointnaz.org/history/.

[204] L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness,* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 51.

happened in that community. With the shift, attendance decreased, and so did tithes and offerings. It seemed like it was happening fast, and we needed to adapt."

Todd Derbyshire has been in full-time ministry since 1990. Rev. Derbyshire says, "Back in the '90s, innovation looked like things like Trunk-or-Treat in the church parking lot, youth on Wednesday nights, and updating facilities. But I've learned really quickly that churches cannot be innovative just to do something new. We have to meet needs." Derbyshire's working definition of innovation is reflected in Jones's work as Jones states, "We are too worried about survival, declining numbers, budget cuts, and diminished influence in society to rediscover what it means to think big, shaped by the new beginnings that come with a focus on the End."[205] Derbyshire says, "I feel like where I thrive in innovation is helping churches see their full potential in their facilities. I have experienced seven building programs with multiple different churches. Part of the desired partnership with Crosspoint is to help them in their relocation and renovation projects with their facilities."

Crosspoint has opened its doors and now has three services in English, Spanish, and Kirundi. Pastor Derbyshire has endured the culture shift by recognizing the changes as a new opportunity for transformation. Crosspoint has not adapted simply to stay relevant and alive but to reflect the community. Derbyshire has spent time getting to know the diversity of cultures in the surrounding community. His voyage outside of the walls of the church and into the community made for a discovery of a group of 15-20 African refugees in a neighborhood meeting in a house for Christian worship. Derbyshire engaged in friendship with those that were participants. That friendship allowed

[205]Ibid., 44-45.

Derbyshire to introduce Nazarene beliefs, and leaders agreed to join the Church of the Nazarene and use their facility for worship. Jones talks about shifting culture by stating, "Attending to the destabilizing forces in the wider culture, as well as asking questions about why we are not reaching the 'unchurched' and 'de-churched' around us. This requires imagination and 'fresh eyes' to see new possibilities, rather than being content with what we already know and are used to doing."[206]

Derbyshire labels his congregation "more blue-collared." Crosspoint does not enjoy the economic comforts it traditionally experienced. Derbyshire has also experienced the comforts of being a vocational pastor for 30 years. Because of the economic changes, pastoral leadership has changed as well. Not only does Derbyshire oversee the ministries of Crosspoint, but he has also decided to lead as a bi-vocational pastor to ease the budgetary burden and create fiscal space for the congregation to dream. Every other Sunday, the Crosspoint congregation allows him to be on the road driving a Class A semi-truck for Wal-Mart. The result of this has liberated volunteers and has increased the number of laymen and women to be locally licensed ministers. Derbyshire has volunteered to decrease his salary by fifty percent. Crosspoint currently has a staff of ten men and women who do not get paid for their positions. Derbyshire believes this leadership shift has created a healthier, more vibrant church willing to give and serve than ever before.

[206] Ibid., 70.

CONCLUSION

When compared to its urban counterpart, the rural church has a distinct culture that creates a unique product of theology, society, and philosophy. Many of the distinctive characteristics of the rural culture are misunderstood. The Church needs to adapt to the needs of the rural community and its culture at play to survive. This body of work does not claim that the rural church faces stricter challenges than urban ones. The reality is that many of the difficulties the church faces are universal. In fact, the church in America is facing an identity crisis. It is not simply a crisis found in rural America.

For millennia, the church has become accustomed to a cultural landscape shaped by predominantly Christian institutions, customs, and narratives. This is where we find a denial at work within the rural church context. It is a denial of the influence that the current surrounding cultural climate dictates theological direction. The rural church has to confess that we no longer live in a society that is shaped by a Christian worldview. The denial of this fact has immobilized and stagnated the current climate of community, missional engagement. The Post-Christian denial creates a failure to engage in the encircling culture and a lack of recognition that other institutions play a vital role in restoring a broken community.

The CTN must look at their strategies and origins in rural communities and find ways to support the decreasing populated areas. If we look at the statistics alone, there is an overwhelming call to the CTN to exegete and adapt to the changing climate that is happening in the rural communities. We see that 49% of Nazarene congregations are in small to rural type communities. Of those congregations, 10% do not have a pastor. The proper response to a pastoral shortage or lack of interest in rural areas should not result in desperate, reckless measures by supplying rural churches with warm-bodied, untrained, and unskilled clergy. Regardless of the pastoral placement, only 40% of the yearly ordained pastoral candidates in the CTN have secondary, formal education and training. That is not to say that God is not able to use the course of study provided by districts or the denomination to equip men and women for ministry adequately. It is to say that there should be rigorous accountability of theological study both within Nazarene educational institutions and district courses of study. If it is expected for pastoral leadership to navigate through theological issues, even common issues, it should be expected for the pastor to engage in continual and higher education.

Pastors need to take responsibility for the roles they play in the church culture that is created. There is a high price we pay for uneducated clergy that can last for decades. The undertones of unhealthy theological teaching from our pulpits and classrooms create cultures of scarcity, self-preservation, elitism, and division. If a person in pastoral ministry of rural churches serves with the belief that it is unimportant to engage in continual education and theological communion with others, after a few years, they will gradually become ordinary or even nobody, regardless of how exceptionally brilliant they were at first. A culture of complacency in personal growth will eventually lead to a

blending of surroundings. We have to raise the standard of accountability from what is spoken on behalf of God and the church.

Congregations need to take responsibility for the role they play in the portion of the culture that is toxic. Although much of church culture is nurtured by leadership, the congregation takes the lead in the weight of pastoral expectations. The congregation should ensure a healthy environment for pastors to flourish and lead with a strong biblical foundation. Many pastors have their beginnings in "Podunk parishes." Those parishes should be a safe landing spot for "green" pastors. They should encourage higher education and deep theological understanding. Congregants should also engage in the disciplines of the church as well as engage the community and culture. If the gathered people of God fail to translate the gospel's good news to the marginalized and broken communities they live in, then they fail to be missional people.

While some rural congregations are vibrant communities that embody the best of our faith, others are poisonous structures run by a small number of tyrants. We have a responsibility to assist such churches in passing gracefully. When the diagnostic techniques are far from accurate, several churches have been portrayed as being in a terminal condition. In order to provide indicators of vitality that accurately reflect the diversity and divergence of our rural space, we must discern what the Spirit wants us to do with these churches. We must equip our pastors to think theologically in every culture.

The health and vitality of a rural church are measured by its leadership, laity, and influence on the broader culture. But if the rural church fails to identify its theological undergirding, then its ministry's effectiveness will be insignificant. If the rural church is preoccupied with church growth strategies and its culture of autonomy, it will fail the

missional and Trinitarian evaluation. When we evaluate rural/ordinary theology, when done well, it will grapple with the mysteries of theological concepts to discover its missional purpose within the community. It will discover initiatives that move the church outside its formal, institutional practices, into the work of the expanded community. The church will look for broader partnerships to help restore a broken community and creation that otherwise would not be realized when left to its own rugged, individualistic efforts. Therefore, this research proposes that a fluent work of the triune God provides the solution to the church's identity dilemma.

When considering any particular contextual theology, theological consistency is necessary, especially in the rural environment. For the rural culture, trinitarian theology is the basic foundation from which the church's operations should be formed. There, the church discovers a different and hopeful framework that is independent of the approval of societal norms or the measures of organizational performance. In all of creation, God is still on a mission. It is a sign and foretaste of God's restoration of all things in Christ via the power of the Spirit; the church has a specific faction to bear witness to that mission.

Rural theology is a contextual theology geared toward the "ordinary" person. When ordinary theology is framed with a Trinitarian outlook, it will inform ecclesial practices. Unfortunately, Trinitarian theology and concepts are difficult to grasp concretely. Therefore, the most useful appropriation for Trinitarian theology for an ordinary theologian is best expressed in three forms: ecclesial practices, interpersonal relationships, and partnerships with community and creation.

Ecclesial Practices

There is a sense that the play of communal practices is done before theological reflection. Rarely does the ordinary theologian identify a practice as a form of Trinitarian theology. The usual flow in missional work is to practice and then reflect. It is within the groundwork of the ecclesial practices of the church that develops a richer theological undergirding. Therefore, some usual examples of ecclesial practices that echo the triune God that the rural church can embrace are as follows:

- Communion - Regular participation in corporate communion.
- Corporate Prayer - Using church altars as means to share burdens through public prayer.
- Tithes and Offerings - Practicing giving of tithes and offerings as an element of corporate worship.
- Confession - Development of safe relationships where confession becomes a normal means of expression.
- Passing the Peace - A time of greeting where worshipers who gather can literally touch one another by holding and shaking hands that can offer humility, fogiveneness, and repentance.
- Public Reading of Scripture - Intentionally allowing the multitude of multigenerational voices from within the local body to exhort lectionary passages.

Interpersonal Relationships

God's "oneness" testifies to the worth of every individual. The rural church's health is based on the obligations of relational involvement with one another where no one is underappreciated, neglected, or lonely. Relational cues are the most helpful

expression to practice trinitarian theology. Therefore, examples of relational practices that echo the triune God that the rural church can embrace are as follows:

- 12-Step Programs
- Prison and Jail Visitation
- Small Groups
- Senior Care
- Ministry to Children and Youth
- Cross-cultural Cooperation
- Commitment to Mothers, Infants, and Toddlers

Community and Creation Partnerships

The church's purpose becomes thickened and expanded through establishing its identity in the Trinity. God's interest extends well beyond the success of the local church, the people in the neighborhood, or the wealth of a certain nation. Understanding ourselves as a sending church activates the Trinity's healing activity and helps the church participate completely in God's whole mission. So while discussing rural theology, the culture is inextricably linked to its community and the environment.

The local congregation can evaluate their assets and fuel their relationships with the community with those assets. In the rural environment, there are visible manifestations of asset-based ministries. Many rural areas contain unoccupied homes, which are occasionally acquired and held by one or a few people. Rural churches may have had the resources to engage pastoral staff and furnish a parsonage at one point, but the residence is no longer required. Those empty houses can be repurposed to establish sober-living environments, food pantries, and second-hand clothing. Church vehicles can

be useful in providing low-cost transportation for essential requirements. Worship facilities, offices, and fellowship halls can be used for health and unity, promoting community activities.

The rural congregation may lack the infrastructure to facilitate or administer the multiple dimensions required for dynamic community development. Therefore, partnerships are essential strategies for the rural church to engage without becoming overwhelmed internally. Here are some examples of community and creation partnerships that echo the triune God that the rural church can adapt to their local context:

- Partnerships in resource sharing - A local congregation can evaluate their assets as far as land, developments, and personnel with an openness to send those assets to strategize participation in God's mission.
- Partnerships in celebration - A local congregation should find ways to celebrate those people and organizations that are meeting the needs of the community. Means of grace are assets rarely evaluated by the local congregation. When the local church celebrates other's activity in God's mission, it is a means of grace that can be shared.
- Partnerships in the local - A way that the local congregation can engage in creation care is by supporting that which is local. Producers and growers that can be successful locally helps cuts emissions and develops a healthier community.
- Partnerships with social agencies - There are multiple expressions that this can be carried out: Providing meeting spaces for parent/child services, documentation centers for undocumented citizens, providing office spaces for social services, and

simply showing appreciation for their community effectiveness. These are simply to name a few.

- Partnerships with community development

It might be daunting for the local church to participate in traditional ministry in a post-Christian society. This is why the church must be involved in the public sphere by sending missionaries into workplaces, political arenas, and community service projects. Instead of overloading churches with the concept of being the developers of community within the organization, empower them to live up to their potential by sending its members to bring about a major change in their own powers of influence.

It is true; the rural church will find it challenging to deepen its Trinitarian theology because of the mystery of the Trinity. But without that framework, the church will continue to base its practices upon traditional and modalistic means. The church that follows the lead of a modalistic God, the result is scarcity, self-preservation, exclusivity, elitism, and division. A lack of social change, community growth, resource sharing, and communal living would result from a modalistic undergirding. Rural theology, when influenced by the Trinitarian nature of God, informs the practices of the local expression of the church and develops significant ministry. This will allow the rural church to embrace missional practices that encourage partnerships to assist more rural churches and their communities to thrive. That implies that, to some extent, we must avoid the temptation to turn to our typical narratives of how "church" is expressed.

The CTN's structure has a sense of Trinitarian theology in that all local congregations are not simply affiliated but are one. Even in the CTN's structure, there should be a consideration of Trinitarian theology to negotiate the terms of what

constitutes a local congregation. Many Nazarene congregations are striving to survive the cultural shifts of their time. When considering our Wesleyan heritage of circuit-riding or itinerant ministry, multi-site provides a means for partnerships within the CTN. Multi-site embraces Wesleyan and trinitarian methodology and theology. It can be a means for the struggling churches to be more unified in its missional approach to live as a local body of believers. But there is still a high price to be paid for autonomy to be the object of ministry planting. The idealism of PAC is that one day, the baby will grow to be independent. This mindset is a harsh standard in rural areas that are declining in population. Much of the rural areas that are needed to be reached will need a supplier or supplements to live into the *Missio Dei* in the rural context. There has to be a mental shift that happens throughout the denomination about "meaningful ministry." Autonomous congregations might have signs of life through statistical growth but may never engage in resource sharing within the community or surrounding areas. This is a detriment to the Church of God and undermines the purpose of God's holy, gathered people.

Podunk does not have to be an insignificant place of ministry. The research conducted for this study aims to draw a conclusion on the rural church's relevance. The history of humanity has taught us that we use power and influence for our own benefit. We create systems of economies and beliefs that intend to liberate the oppressed. Still, the product of individualism drives down the depths of oppression and margins further. The good news for the rural context is that God is masterful at stepping into the messes we have made and bringing deliverance, freedom, hope, and redemption where there is despair and darkness. God has a chosen people He calls to participate in the ministry of reconciliation to the whole world. It is a ministry that calls the church to participate in the

salvation that affects an entire people group. The rural context is a field where the harvest is ripe and ready for God to continue to do His redemptive work.

For the rural church to carry out God's mission, it must root its identity as a "sent people for God's mission." In other words, the church will have to embrace a missional mindset to "camp" in the places where the mission is happening. Those places are where those that are disconnected, marginalized, and displaced from the faith and the organized church. The rural spaces are those places. There is no need to be preoccupied with the justification of the presence and influence of God's church in rural settings. Regardless of its justification for existence, there is a call for the rural church to thicken its missional purpose in its space. The rural church needs a deeper understanding of the Trinity and will have an ecclesiology actively participating in sending. It will send all available resources to fulfill its pursuits. Therefore, if the church sees itself as a "sending church," it takes ecclesial cues from the Triune God. The rural church must embrace and be content with having the characteristics of a sending, resource-sharing church. It allows the church to be an outpost where all of creation can find reconciliation, restoration, and *Shalom*.

Again, it is the ministry of God that sends. The rural church will struggle with sending laypeople and resources because of the fears of scarcity and the emotional investment in loving relationships. But if the rural church has an undergirding of Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology, they will find themselves using that as an instrument to measure its effectiveness. Although there is sadness whenever there is a sending, it does not conclude the mission but rather, it begins the Trinitarian dance all over again.

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