

DISTINCTIVES OF A RURAL MINISTRY

Virgil Warren, PhD

1. Intergenerational

Rural people are more intergenerational than city people. Their normal activities are less age-graded because there are fewer people and because family ties are generally stronger. As a result, they are less likely to warm up to the idea of putting their small children in a nursery during Sunday school and church. The children themselves are less accustomed to being left with a sitter while the parents go to some purely adult activity.

2. Traditional-Conservative

There will be more resistance to change than in urban settings. Life feels less secure for rural people because their lives are closely tied to the uncertainties of weather and other natural processes. Change is psychologically more difficult for them because they do not want to “rock the boat” on the things that are more settled for them. They are an oral society more than a paper one. They are accustomed to using “tradition” rather than written procedure to order life. They depend on the memory of routine rather than on written directions. Changing things all the time is confusing.

They may not be as open to altering the order of service or adopting a new procedure for selecting church officers. Since the way things are done has descended from people they know, they may even regard changing some method as a comment on a person they knew or the loved one that originated that way of doing things. Another factor in this resistance to change is that ministry has a higher turnover rate in rural areas. If churches changed everything every minister wanted to change that “came down the pike,” they would always be changing everything, or so it would seem: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Ministers have to remember that this is their church; if things do not go right, there is nowhere else for them to go. A preacher can leave and go to the next congregation, but this is their home and this is where they are “stuck.” Consequently they are not about to “rock the boat” on things that do not matter all that much as far as they can see.

The rural community is tied to the land that has been inherited from generation to generation. This factor makes integration into the community slower and more difficult. A minister naturally comes into the area as an outsider and he will be one for ten years or more. Since “outsiders” do not lead, ministers need to be sensitive to their newcomer status for quite a while, and they have to rely on persuasion and personal relationship as the medium of influence. Authority and position are largely irrelevant.

Because the economic base of rural communities is so unstable and unpredictable, stewardship is more difficult to get farmers to commit themselves to on a regular, intense basis. In a depressed economy their impulse is not to spend any more than they have to. That is part of the reason it is harder for a minister to get as satisfactory a financial package.

Conservatism in monetary matters reflects itself also in having CD’s with perhaps several thousand dollars in them at the local bank. This is an attempt to put stability under the religious needs of the next generation. These people are looking at the depopulation

trend in their area and the graying of the church membership. Many of the older ones remember depression days and the wars since the '40's. It behooves a minister not to get too critical of what he may see as a "lack of faith" in financial matters. To them "going out on a limb" is not faith but foolhardiness. For them it seems better to put back for a "rainy day" than to have to close the doors of the church in a few years. The people are more likely to give to clearly defined projects with fixed costs of reasonable proportions. They give more readily to projects than to patterns. They are slower than urban Christians to go into debt for a major renovation of the building or for erecting a new church or Sunday school addition.

3. Close-Knit

Because there are fewer people, everybody knows everybody and everybody seems to be related to everybody else. Many rural congregations amount to household churches. There is very often a patriarch or matriarch who is the "mother of us all." The cement that holds them together is kinship more than doctrine, custom more than constitutions. A minister tends to be more prominent in the community because there are not as many other "professional" people around. His life is more transparent to the community since the people all see more easily what he is doing.

Anniversaries may be held at the church. Since there are fewer social processes, church, community, and family affairs blend together more completely. There is even a kind of "civil religion" here. Preaching and church programming can tie into these community activities. Sermons can be scheduled to relate to memorial days, anniversaries, and so on.

One effect of the more closely knit community is the tendency for public schools and the church to be less at odds with each other than is the case in many city situations. Some small towns have it understood that no school or civic events are scheduled on Wednesday evening; that is a church night. One difficulty can be that particular people in the church will try to get the preacher to support from the pulpit some community cause they believe in. The announcement period will include community affairs as well as church activities.

3. Event Oriented

Rural people are more event oriented than time-schedule oriented. Consequently, the range of punctuality is bigger. Getting evening church started "on time" is less likely. People are not "late till maybe 10 or 15 minutes after starting time. With city people the range of punctuality is more like 3 to 5 minutes. Afterwards people stand around and talk longer than their urban counterparts. The important thing is not the clock but who is there and what is going on.

4. People Oriented

Country people are more person oriented than goal oriented. They concern themselves more with personal process than with strict procedures. For them the leaders in the church are the people they respect, not so much the one who holds a given office or has

official responsibility for some task in the church. When they pass each other on the road they, they are more likely to wave than city people are, especially if they are part of the older generation. They like interpersonal activities such as church dinners, and the ladies like to cook as “a labor of love.” Social activities go well in homes.

Among country people voluntary swapping of favors still replaces the city person’s impulse to take care of things through the exchange of money. The rural person operates more on the barter system than on a pay basis.

4. Informal

Country people are less structured in the way they go about things. This factor correlates with their not being “paper people,” their reliance on custom for more complex procedures, and their preference for group process over official decision. An envelop system for giving is not as likely to “catch on” as it is in a city church. There may be greater difficulty getting people to take up-front leadership roles. Not as high a proportion of them have public responsibilities. Fewer will feel comfortable leading in public prayer or presiding at the Lord’s table. They will not worry too much about dressing up; so a minister should not be surprised if they do not wear a coat or tie in serving the emblems or taking up the offering.

Decision-making is more of a group process in the country; consequently, it takes longer to reach a conclusion because they unconsciously strive for consensus. A seven-to-five decision by the elders will not “go down” even if the by-laws officially call for a simple majority. Everybody feels that he has a right to take part in the decisions that affect him. People in the country are not as willing to follow the decisions made by an official body. They all know each other; there is not the sense of distance between “me” and the “leaders” as there is in a city situation where there are lots of people, many of whom the typical person may not even know very well.

5. Individualistic

Farmers are their own bosses. They do not take kindly to directive personalities that come around trying to tell them what to do or believe. They are less likely to go to anyone— including a minister—for counseling. Enthusiasm for group projects may be harder to generate. There is a self-reliance they have in themselves and they expect in their minister.

Because of individualism farmers work with each other as equals. They “don’t cotton to” a preacher that is too bossy. You need to get their cooperation; you ask what they think; you offer suggestions; you don’t tell them what to do, because you are the outsider and you are on their turf.

6. Prestige Earned

More than other people, rural folk do not care so much whether you have a college degree, but whether you know what you are talking about. There is a sense of distance from the “city slicker” with “head larnin’” and no “horse sense.” Since education has less status in their lives, they compensate for any accompanying loss of prestige by

giving high profile to their own strengths—hard work, making their own way, being strong in the face of setbacks. One thing a farmer can't stand is somebody that is lazy, somebody who wants to talk instead of do something. Preachers tend to do a lot more talking than doing what a farmer can appreciate.

Do not try to cover up your ignorance about things familiar to them. Ask questions instead of trying to make statements. They resent a “know-it-all.” Do not try to act too educated. Country people have had to earn their way and they expect you to earn yours. Education, authority, and status “doesn’t cut any ice” with these people when it comes to getting them to do something.

7. Phlegmatic

The farmer’s life is more characterized by working at one thing at a time until it is done and then doing the next job. He keeps at what he is doing until it is finished. Consequently, trying to get him to take on other projects while he is busy with this one is not apt to happen. The result is that they are harder to “get fired up” about some project.

8. Unique Schedule

Farmers have heavier and lighter times of the year. Planting time and harvest time are very important to them. In the spring getting a crop in when it is dry is very important; if they do not get it in when the time is ripe, they may have to wait a couple weeks before they get another chance, which may make it too late to get the seasonal rains it needs. Harvest time is another time of heavy involvement when farmers work eighteen hours a day for a week or two at a time. Getting the wheat in before a storm blows it down is very important because much of a farmer’s income for the year is concentrated in this relatively short time period.

The uneven schedule means that revivals, vacation Bible school, calling emphases and other special activities should be planned around the natural high points in the agricultural cycle. A minister should not be too surprised if church attendance is down during these pressure times of the year. He should not interpret this as an indication of low spiritual commitment; after all, city people work on Sunday when their job requires them to be there. Stewardship in the church is often affected by the way money comes in. Since a farmer is not on a steady income, he is inclined to give sporadically. Timing of church services has to take into consideration the fact that there are chores on Sunday just as there are on any other day of the week. Morning services tend to be later in rural areas, and evening services are set late enough for the farmers to finish milking or slopping the hogs and cleaning up afterwards. Church activities should not be planned too late; farmers get up early.

9. Miscellaneous

In today’s rural areas there is a higher proportion of older people. Younger families have to take care of much larger tracts of land in order to make a living. Consequently, there are fewer young people and fewer who stay around in their twenties, thirties, and forties to maintain “the family farms,” which are fast becoming non-existent.

Farmers often have to work in town to support themselves fully. This means that many of them end up busier than city people.

Acceptable music in rural areas is of the less complicated sorts. Country and western music, folk music, gospel songs are more to their liking. Classical music and music with a heavy beat, especially if it is loud, is rather foreign to custom.

Because the rural congregation is more spread out across the countryside, multiplying activities at the church may be counterproductive. Although the people have grown up having to go a long ways to get anywhere, still they do not naturally relish driving fifteen miles one way to a church activity. This problem has become more acute since consolidated schools and increased school activities have intensified demands on the time of younger families.

If you are not from a rural, agricultural background, let the people of the congregation set time of service and the way of going about things that are simply cultural in format. Making such decisions as a group is always the best policy anyway, but among rural people it is all the more expected and imperative, especially since you are an outsider.