



Big News, Small Towns

Covenant churches are thriving in unexpected places. | THAIS CARTER

Across America, small communities are getting smaller. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service, half of the rural counties in the U.S. declined in population between 2000 and 2005. Most of those shrinking counties were in the Midwest and Great Plains, with Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, and North Dakota seeing the largest drops.

For churches located in rural counties, there seem to be only three options: maintain, shrink, or close. But a number of small-town Covenant churches have found another way. From Norway, Michigan, and Dresden,

Kansas, to Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Moose Lake, Minnesota, Covenant churches are thriving.

In Poplar, Wisconsin (population 522), Mission Covenant Church has grown from 205 to 486 in average attendance over the last ten years. Community Covenant Church in Upsala, Minnesota (population 424), has grown from 140 to 199 during that same period. And Lewis Lake Covenant Church in Ogilvie, Minnesota (population 474), has grown in attendance from 92 to 176.

Compared to megachurches, which have come to symbolize successful ministry, these numbers may not seem impressive. But these churches

are finding ways to grow—both spiritually and numerically—in challenging circumstances.

Understanding success

Pastors of these churches say there's no silver-bullet solution to making a small town church work. They describe the hard work, prayer, relationships, and persistence that lay the foundation for a thriving church. In these churches, thriving means both a healthy congregational life and a sense of momentum toward the future.

Momentum isn't the first word that comes to mind when thinking about

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Upsala, Minnesota. Long characterized as an agricultural community, the town has seen many of its farms close down.

“We’ve had quite a drop off in the last twenty years, especially in dairy farmers,” says Craig Johnson, pastor of Community Covenant Church. “In the late seventies, early eighties, this town was considered dying. At one point, they sent a pastor out here and told him he would probably be the one to close the church.”

That didn’t happen, thanks to the revitalization efforts led by Rudy and Nancy King, a couple gifted in rural ministry, in the late 1980s. (The Kings now serve Prairieview Covenant Church in New Richmond, Wisconsin.) By the time Johnson arrived, there was a sense of hope in this 118-year-old church.



Easter service at Mission Covenant Church in Poplar, Wisconsin

When he came to Community Covenant, Johnson was told that Upsala was a town of 400 people, five churches, and one bar.

“It’s an interesting area,” he says. “Today, many of the towns around us have maybe two Lutheran churches and a Catholic church—that’s it.”

Johnson says people at Community Covenant are “growing in their faith, with their eyes looking outward.”

“When I first came here, one misconception I brought is that it’s always about the numbers,” he says. “We don’t underestimate numbers, because that’s our call as well, but if everything in health is related to whether or not you’ve added fifty people, then something is wrong.”

The Covenant church in Poplar, Wisconsin, has created its own measure

for health as well. Located about twenty miles from Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth, Minnesota, it has the flavor of a very small town.

“You can’t get a gallon of milk after 6 p.m., unless of course you’re willing to drive the distance into town,” says Darrell Nelson, pastor of Mission Covenant Church.

In making decisions about ministry, the pastoral staff at Mission Covenant has to balance several factors. First, the church’s location gives it a regional draw, with the average person in the congregation driving around fifteen miles to attend services, with some coming from forty miles away. Second, the region’s economy is in transition. Many residents once worked in manufacturing, which has since dried up. As a



Darrell Nelson

result, many people are leaving because the economy can’t hold them.

In this setting, Nelson hesitates to use words like *success* or *prosper*.

“We prefer to use the word *healthy*,” he says. “That means a few basic things: the Bible is taught, people are devoted to praying and growing in relationships, and we take an evangelistic, community-oriented approach to ministry.”

With those basics in place, Nelson says, a church has a healthy foundation on which to build ministries and programs. “People think there’s some sort of magic style of worship or style of ministry that if we adopt it, then people will come pouring in,” he says. “Those things will help us, but it’s who we are in Christ Jesus, not our programs, that defines us. Programs and ministries come out of growing spiritually.”

Community is the lifeline

Johnson and Nelson believe that in small towns, having a community mindset is critical to healthy ministry.

“People have to have the outward vision,” says Johnson, “but they also have to have the willingness to care for people in need. That naturally spills over into bringing and inviting people to church. For us, that’s looked less programmatic and more like people just loving their neighbors.”

Nelson says a small-town setting opens up possibilities for a church to serve its neighbors in ways that a larger community precludes. That can mean something as basic as conducting a funeral for someone with no connection to the church, because there is a need.

“That’s something you just have to do,” he says. “Churches in metro areas can’t possibly touch all the needs in their communities, but we have to try because we’re so connected and dependent on one another.”

That interconnectedness can be a major strength of ministry in a small town, where people see each other at work, at school, and at the grocery store in addition to Sunday services.

“Relationships in the rural community are so predominant that when people begin to think and act biblically, they have a profound impact in their communities,” Nelson says. “When I lived in Chicago, I didn’t even know the people that lived eight feet away in my apartment building. Here, something happens to someone twenty miles away and you know all about it.”

“We know each other so well,” Johnson adds, “that when we’re willing to, we can interact at a very deep level. Sometimes I’ll get calls from people, not asking me to go minister to a family, but telling me that they’ve already taken care of it. They tell me what the issues are, what they’ve done to help, and that they wanted to keep me informed. They see their neighbors as a part of their responsibility. It doesn’t come out every time, but it’s a blessing to watch when it does.”

In addition to this informal min-

istry, structured outreach at both Mission Covenant and Community Covenant primarily takes place through children and youth programs.

Churches in small communities will often give sacrificially to hire additional staff, says Steven Dawson, director of technical services for the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism.

“For families that are moving into that community, and especially those with kids, having a kids ministry means that they’ll probably end up going to your church,” says Dawson.

That can be a challenge for small churches, Dawson adds, especially when finances are tight and paying a pastor’s salary can be a challenge.

Rural roadblocks

Finances are just one of the hurdles that small-town pastors and congregations have to deal with. Another potential pitfall comes out of a core strength: relationships. Sometimes congregation members know too much about each other. The “smallness” of small towns can still catch longtime residents and pastors off guard.

“We live in such close range that we’re all interacting on many different levels almost all of the time,” says Johnson. “Because of that, there’s very little room for inconsistency in your faith. It’s like family—they know your faith isn’t perfect because they live with you. In that way, when people are frustrated with each other at one of the church board meetings, it isn’t always about what we’re discussing at the time, but over something that happened earlier this week at school or work. Understanding that, we try and extend a little bit of extra grace day to day.”

Another issue is something called “koinonitis,” or the “holy huddle.” A spinoff of the Greek word *koinonia*, meaning fellowship or shared life, koinonitis happens when that fellowship is more self-absorbed than self-sacrificing—bringing members to a point where they don’t feel comfortable including

“People think there’s some sort of magic style of worship or style of ministry that if we adopt it, then people will come pouring in.”

any new people. “Even though relationships in rural communities are a very positive thing,” Nelson says, “we run into trouble when we close ourselves off to others.” The most difficult challenge to overcome, however, has less to do with relationships with others, and much more to do with the average member’s feelings toward their town and feelings toward God. Nelson sums it up in one word: despair.

“There’s a lack of hope in many of these communities,” he says. “To be brutally honest, we’ve had over 100 people move away from our church in the last year due to economic reasons—that’s devastating. And even though we have a lot of exciting things happening in our church, it’s demoralizing to know that we might not be able to hold people.”

Johnson believes that those feelings about the economy and the future of the town carry over into church life.

“So many people think that because we’re a small church we can’t do this or that,” Johnson says. “There’s an underestimation of the possibilities and of what God might want to do in your community. There’s this belief that if you want to be a part of something significant in God’s kingdom, you have to be somewhere else other than rural ministry. That carries into people’s vision, or lack of it, at many different points.”

Nelson adds that small churches are sometimes intimidated by the success of megachurches—leading to crisis of confidence.

“There’s a failure to realize that God is not a respecter of persons,” Nelson says. “God doesn’t love Billy Graham or Rick Warren or Bill Hybels any more than he loves me as a pastor. He doesn’t love Saddleback or Willowcreek or James Meeks’s church any more than he does Mission Covenant. We have to overcome that kind of thinking.”

Breaking through despair means celebrating small victories and “redis-

covering hope,” Nelson adds.

“We may have lost people and are grieving over friends and loved ones who have left town, but we still have new people coming in the door and many opportunities.” □

THRIVE WHERE YOU ARE: some thoughts on ministry from two small-town pastors

When looking for advice on successful ministry, pastors and lay leaders often turn to megachurches for answers. This month, writer Thais Carter asked two long-time small town pastors—Craig Johnson of Community Covenant Church in Upsala, Minnesota, and Darrell Nelson, pastor of Mission Covenant Church in Poplar, Wisconsin—for their advice on ministry.

Believe that good things can happen in your community. “God is the God of the impossible. He can do anything, anywhere,” says Nelson.

Start with the basics. “Be strong in the word, in what Christ is doing, in preaching and teaching. It’s the foundation of what we’re doing,” says Johnson.

Find your motivation. “You need to evaluate why you want success. There’s nothing wrong with being successful—Nehemiah prayed for success—but ask yourself if it is to honor God,” says Nelson.

Prepare for stress. “If you want to turn it up a notch at your church, be ready to pray, pray, and pray more. Moving forward comes with a lot of stress,” says Johnson.

Get started. “Do something, anything. God can steer and move a moving object, but it’s a lot harder when things aren’t moving. Remember, sooner or later you need to get out of the war room and try something. Start small, and do the best you can at that,” says Nelson.

Measure correctly. “You have to be willing to look at the long haul. Don’t get discouraged if things don’t happen in a year—it might take five or ten years. Some things I hoped for I’m only now living ten years later. Trust in God’s timing,” says Johnson. □