

Lessons from Small Town Churches



Some of the most important lessons of ministry are not taught in classrooms, but in churches, where congregations help seminarians learn the art of pastoring—its challenges and rewards. In town and country churches, young ministers learn the contours of ministry within the unique setting of rural life. In the following stories, pastors offer a glimpse into the vibrant life of these congregations.

Healthy and Missional in Ceresco CATHY KAMINSKI

I thought I grew up in a small town—until someone told me recently that Westborough, Massachusetts, with its population of 18,000 and located just thirty miles west of Boston is practically a metropolis. When I think “urban,” I tend to look back on my ministry experiences in Boston, London, and Chicago. That is city life.

All my ministry experience until recently had been serving urban church plants. When I pictured my call to ministry, it was hard to imagine anything else. But I was open to going outside my comfort zone and following where God would lead me.

Out of that willingness to delve into the unknown came the opportunity to serve in a rural church. It was an opportunity that changed my life.

Here is the truth: the need for God is just as present in a town of 900 as it is in a city of 900,000. And there are faithful and vibrant churches in small towns in need of pastors. What surprised me most about rural ministry were the similarities to urban ministry. In a city, community is forged through intentionality. For a town and country setting, community is not simply intentional, it is inevitable! For good or for bad everyone knows your business. But in both cities and small

towns, the same kind of intimacy and sense of identity can develop from being a part of a close-knit community.

This year I have had the opportunity to serve as a pastoral intern in Ceresco, Nebraska. As I drove my car from Chicago last August toward the corn fields, I did not know what to expect. What greeted me on the other end of my journey was a family with open arms and open hearts. Forty people from the church waited with anticipation



Cathy Kaminski

to help me unload my packed CRV and to welcome their new pastor. The joke about small towns is that news travels faster there than anything else. In my case, news of my arrival traveled to town before I even entered the county. Someone had driven past me on the highway and, seeing my heaps of luggage and Massachusetts license plates, headed straight to the church to let people know I was just around the corner!

Three years ago, Jodi Moore, pastor of Evangelical Covenant Church in Ceresco, created an internship for a seminary student to share her job description and serve the church for a year. The congregation took on the mantle of a teaching congregation and made space for a student to come into his or her own pastoral identity among them. In this place I have been humbled and blessed to serve as worship leader, teaching pastor, preaching pastor, pastoral care pastor, children's pastor, administrative pastor, and everything in between.

Jodi and the congregation have put their own skin in the game, taking on the financial burden of supporting an intern and taking a chance on a new seminary student each year. Just as I have been transformed by this experience, I know it has also challenged and stretched the congregation as a whole as they contribute to the education and training of future pastors in the Covenant. I am thankful for their sacrifice and willingness to give a city mouse like me the opportunity to fall in love with the country.

And what's not to love? Did you know pastors golf for free in rural areas? (At least they do in Nebraska.) I may be a horrible golfer, but I get to practice as often as I want at the local country club. And let me talk about the barbeque. No one throws a fundraiser like a small town and country church trying to raise funds to meet their budget. People drive for miles just to

support area churches and indulge in barbeque and homemade pie.

But what blows me away the most about rural ministry are the parishioners. There is such beauty in a small town as evidenced in the people. I have found rural communities to be saturated with hardworking, faithful followers of Christ who walk in the footsteps of the saints who have gone before. I have worshiped in churches rich in heritage and tradition, yet willing and open to change because they desire to grow and see the community around them transformed through the love and truth of Christ.

The Covenant church in Ceresco has been in existence for 107 years, and is currently walking the pathway of vitality with the denomination as the congregation seeks to follow where God leads. This process has led our compassion, mercy, and justice team to plant a community garden to help meet the needs of our neighbors. We participate in the town's backpack program to ensure that kids have at least one well-rounded meal to take home for the weekend. We hold the annual town Easter egg hunt to reach out to young families.

These are just some of the many ways in which our small church is seeking God's will in our community. In a rural church, "healthy and missional" might not translate to 500 people on a Sunday morning or a million-dollar budget. Healthy and missional is embodied in the healing of brokenness, meeting the needs of the surrounding community, and disciples growing in Christ.

I still don't know what God has in store for me in my life of ministry to come. But I do know this: I would be blessed to serve in a town and country church and be a part of what God is doing in rural ministry ■

Cathy Kaminski is serving as a pastoral intern at Evangelical Covenant Church in Ceresco, Nebraska. She plans to graduate from North Park Theological Seminary with a master of divinity degree in May.

Turning It Up a Notch

JAMES HARRELSON

It had been a long time since Community Covenant Church in Osage City, Kansas, had had an intern—more than fifty years. True, those interns had turned out well—one went on to become the president of the Covenant and another the dean of the seminary—but could we pull it off again?

There was no question in our minds that we had something to offer a person looking for a good experience in rural ministry. We had gone through some pretty sweeping transformations over the past couple of years, and we felt like we had a way to look at rural ministry that was different, engaging, impactful, and sound. So we took the plunge. With the help of the Covenant's Town and Country Commission and the Dusty Larson Fund, we offered a three-month internship to a North Park Seminary student.

What we didn't expect was that our intern, Ryan Mahoney, would have such a powerful impact on us. To be honest, we went into this knowing that we were something of a test case. We had two young men to interview, and honestly, we could have chosen either of them and had a wonderful experience. But in the end, what we got in Ryan was a great fit. And we still feel a close connection to him, even eighteen months after he left us.

Ryan brought enthusiasm, new ideas, energy, and passion with him. We thought we were doing pretty well in those areas, but in many ways Ryan turned us up a notch. He put together an impromptu concert with a musician friend of his that was a tremendous success. He helped us organize Community Sunday, where we go out into the town for a whole day and help people with things they are unable to do (painting, raking, ►

Committed to Community in Osage City

RYAN MAHONEY

yard work, etc.). He transformed the sanctuary into one big living room for worship. (And although we moved it all back after he left, it was so cool at the time!) He helped us lead worship in a small town that literally got blown away by a tornado, and he brought a new feel to our regular Sunday worship. His sermons were thoughtful and creative. His impact on everyone in the church was remarkable. He even got old pastors to think new thoughts. He was a hit!

We know that not every internship experience is heavenly. And Ryan didn't turn our church around single-handedly in three months. But he brought us a really great opportunity to learn and be challenged to live up to the things we thought we wanted to be. Hosting an intern is partly about finding the right candidate—but only partly. It is also about being the right host. It is about being intentionally educative. Especially in a three-month internship, you cannot waste time. Everything you do, every day, counts. Every encounter between intern and supervisor is a precious moment of opportunity. The intensive nature of such an experience means that we must take advantage of every minute of each day.

It also means that we have to let the intern take risks and chances. That is how we learn. We do not learn by staying tethered to where it is always safe. This is true both of interns and churches. Indeed, a three-month intern is a great way to untether a local church engaged in rural ministry, to swing out into something new and energizing. From our experience, you can't go wrong! ■

James Harrelson is pastor of Community Covenant Church in Osage City, Kansas.

Who am I and what am I doing here?

That was my constant refrain as a seminary student. I'm the only one in my family to pursue a career in ministry, and the only one of my friends from home to do so. And because there are probably as many perspectives on ministry as there are people in the universe, seminary became something of an existential dilemma on steroids for me. My internal dialogue consisted of voices of doubt and uncertainty.

One day in May 2011, I drove from Chicago to Osage City, Kansas, and those questions were amplified along the way: Who am I and what am I doing?

Several months earlier I had begun conversations with the field education department at North Park Theological Seminary about possible internship experiences. I was told about opportunities all over the country. In the midst of our discussions, someone mentioned in passing that I should apply for the Dusty Larson internship.

Dusty Larson was a Covenant pastor who served in rural settings, and a memorial fund in his honor had been set up to support rural ministry. Coordinating with the Town and Country Commission, his family established a fund to assist seminary students who serve in rural contexts. Many North Park students love the urban location of the campus but have little exposure to the meaningful ministry that happens in rural contexts.

Community Covenant Church, located in Osage City, a town of 3,000 residents, has an interesting story. Back when western territories and farming plots were being divided up, towns were often founded on the corners where a few plots intersected. There would be a school, a post office, and a church—a town.

Community Covenant was originally Stotler Covenant, the lone holdover of one of those four-corner towns. The only evidence that there was ever a Stotler area was Stotler Covenant Church. The leadership of the church recognized that the purpose of a church is to serve people, that church is not a stagnant thing but rather it is dynamic, constantly looking for where God might lead next. So they moved into town.

They built a building without debt, often consuming whole weekends with church people finishing floors, painting, and installing dry wall. For a while they had no musicians. They were forced to worship with a kind of karaoke hybrid. One church member recalled, "That was brutal. You can only sing 'I Could Sing of Your Love Forever' for so long... those tracks were like nine minutes apiece." It was not until one of the youth of the church realized that his years of practice on the video game *Guitar Hero* might in fact translate to playing a real guitar that the church had its own musician.

As I heard these stories and listened to the Town and Country Commission describe their heart for rural ministry, and as I further reflected on the anxieties I was experiencing as a seminarian, my head was filled with one thought: *This will either be fantastic—or tragic.*

I cannot remember most of the drive from Chicago to Kansas because I was caught up wondering about what might happen. What would the town be like? What about the people? What if I hated it? What if I loved it? Would there be a Sonic Drive-in there? My questions were endless.

Despite my anxieties, it took me no time at all to fall in love with Osage and the people of Community Covenant. I spent the first week having

dinner with different church families. I sat with folks who have lived in the community for so long that they dismiss street addresses in favor of relational descriptions like, "They live in the Johnsons' old house." I was invited in the homes of people who were energized about their community. They did not want to use big cities as a reference for everything Osage did not have; they wanted to see Osage be the best it could



be. And that was why they joined a church.

As internships go, there are responsibilities and checklists of requirements the intern is supposed to meet. Part of the requirements for this internship was that I create and oversee a new ministry in the church. Pastor Jim had this idea rolling around about locking the doors to the church on a Sunday and going out to serve the community for a whole day. I was entrusted with making this happen. It would take place at the end of the summer, and it would be called Community Sunday.

About midway through the summer, the project began to take on

some real character.

Small town politics are fascinating, and two cultures come together in Osage City. It's where rural farmers meet small town folks. Osage is where a deep held commitment to self-reliance meets people who feel a responsibility to the community.

The moment that brought this tension to a head was when the newly elected city council voted to stop construction on the stretch of the Flint Hills Nature Trail that runs through the town. Part of a 117-mile rail trail in eastern Kansas, the project had been supported by several previous councils.

Osage had never seen such a turnout for a city council meeting. Tempers flared, presentations were made, and in the end the council did not reverse its decision. Outside the meeting I talked with the firm representing the trail and told them that I was organizing volunteers for community projects. After several weeks of correspondence, I added them to the list of projects for Community Sunday.

The trail was not just divisive in town, it was divisive within our church. The main issue was the price tag and who should be responsible for it. Discussions about the trail happened before church, after church, and throughout the week. Needless to say, I did not want to exacerbate the tensions by sending volunteers to work on the trail. Yet despite the risks, we included this project in our plans.

On Community Sunday, I divided the church into teams and sent them to their works sites throughout Osage. Some helped at nursing homes, others painted a community center, others collected trash, but the whole time I was wondering how

The Dusty Larson Fund A Vision for Rural Ministry

Having spent most of his ministry pastoring small town and rural churches, Quentin "Dusty" Larson had a real heart for such churches. Serving on the Town and Country Commission became a passion for him, and he wanted to encourage new pastors to experience the depth and joy of that ministry.



When the commission began making plans to fund a scholarship program in 1994 for North Park Seminary students, many were graduating with significant seminary debt, as well as college loans. Those financial burdens made the option of ministering in a small church with a limited budget nearly impossible. Dusty's vision was that a scholarship fund would help pay down the educational debts for a graduate who planned to serve a town and country church. He committed to make contacts to raise seed money to get the fund established.

Not long after, Dusty was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and he died in May 1996 while undergoing surgery to strengthen the vertebrae in his back. Memorial gifts became that seed money, and the fund was called the Dusty Larson Memorial Scholarship.

This fund grew and was used for about fifteen years to assist seminary graduates as they served in town and country churches. In recent years the Town and Country Commission adjusted its funding, due in part to the success of the Presidential Scholarship program at the seminary. While still maintaining the original vision of encouraging seminarians to experience the ministry possibilities in rural and small town churches, the commission established the summer intern program in 2011.

Through this program the commission partners with North Park Theological Seminary to create an ongoing summer internship program in rural settings. Each intern participates in all aspects of pastoral life, and the congregation invests in each student through the Dusty Larson Fund. This \$3,000 scholarship is made available to three congregations each year. Congregations who wish to apply can go to CovChurch.org and search "Dusty Larson internship." ■

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things were going at the trail.

The trail organizers had told me to ask the volunteers to bring clippers of various sizes and work gloves. Little did they know that at Community Covenant we have some people with some serious equipment. When I arrived at the site to see how things were going, several folks said, “Just using clippers on this project will take years. I’m going home to get my backhoe.”

When we all returned to the church, we shared story after story about our time in the community. And this is why church is beautiful: the trail had been divisive and people had strong opinions, but folks who stood on different sides of the issues and had no qualms using strong language to explain their views were willing to work together to make their community better. At the end of the day, our church cleared the entire trail through the entire city! There were things still left to be accomplished, including paving the path, but the whole trail was cleared.

One story from this day sums up my experience with rural ministry and the people of Community Covenant Church. In preparation for Community Sunday, the youth group had sold shirts with the name of the church on them to raise money for CHIC. We wore the shirts as we worked throughout the community, and apparently people noticed us that day. While one of our young volunteers was taking her lunch break at a local restaurant, a couple of men asked her, “Are you all some kind of do-gooder group? Why are you doing all of this stuff?”

“Because that’s what we believe Jesus is like,” she answered.

My experience in Osage and my experience with the Town and Country Commission, who day in and day out work with underfunded and under-represented communities, has deeply changed me. I believe they do what they do because that’s what they believe Jesus is like. I want to do the same. ■