



If It Ain't Heaven, Then It's a Mission Field

Kevin E. Ruffcorn

"Almost heaven West Virginia . . . country roads, take me home."

*Whether we're in the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia,
the forests of northern Minnesota, or the plains of Nebraska*

the words of John Denver's song ring true

in our hearts. There is an idyllic quality to rural America.

*Traffic is two cars meeting at an intersection, and a power
meeting is a group of the locals gathered for coffee at*

the donut shop. Life is tied to the weather and the land.

*There is a sense that we are closer to who we really are as people
when we stroll along tree-lined paths, than when we trudge*

cement sidewalks through valleys of steel and glass.

Rural America is not heaven, though. The closest we can get is "almost." We are not as deeply into post-Christendom, in the rolling hills of Northeastern Nebraska, where I serve, as they are on the East and West Coasts. Congregations play an important and respected role in

community life, but there is a growing diversity in nationalities, languages, spiritual beliefs, and religious practices. The world hasn't been totally deconstructed by post-modernism—yet. It is not one big question mark and there are some vestiges of authority left. At the same time, personal opinion is the most trusted authority, authenticity is prized, and there is a free for all to find true community—even among extended families. Underneath this mosaic is the broken world of family strife, abuse, drugs, financial concerns, depression, despair, and unbelief—a true mission field.

It isn't the same mission field, though, that it was when the

sod was first broken, or in the mid 50s, when the migration to urban areas became pronounced. Today farmers drive combines with global positioning systems. The local hospitals provide an array of visiting health specialists and Flights for Life. Rural congregations are faced with the daunting

challenge of sharing the "Old, old story . . . of Jesus and his love" in new, new ways. Changes (those terrible things that are often thought to be the work of Satan) need to be made in order for this to happen. The talents of the lay leaders, faith of the congregations, and gifts and dedication of the pastors will all be stressed and stretched during the necessary transformation process from unseen religious gathering places into effective congregational ministry centers.

Perhaps the most pressing transformation that needs to occur is for the congregation to become a place of prayer. The flimsy excuse, "We're too busy to pray," will not cut it any

more. The gospel of Jesus Christ is too important not to pray. Prayer may take a variety of forms. Several members of one congregation walk the streets of their small town on a weekly basis and pray for each household that they pass. A few congregations have developed 24/7-prayer ministries. Space for silent prayer and opportunities to pray with others about specific prayer needs are worship options. The modeling of prayer and meditation by pastor, staff and lay leaders can be powerful.

A congregational vision for mission—one discerned through prayer—is an absolute necessity. The sights of many rural congregations do not go beyond keeping the doors open for another year, but God has more in store for God's people than mere survival. Birthing a vision starts with a simple question, "God, what would you have us to do?" Visions are different and scary—they have that "we've never done it this way" flavor. At the same time, they are exciting and empowering.

It is important to take a critical look at worship. The congregation's focus must shift from fulfilling the likes and dislikes of the members to making worship meaningful to a broader range of people—this is being "seeker sensitive." The primary question to ask is, "What can we do to make our worship service more appealing to more people?" Liturgical format and hymns need to be discussed, but organizing a praise band is not a for-gone conclusion. Being more "user friendly," with clear worship instructions, or worship services printed in the bulletin is always an area for improvement. Hospitality issues—everything from smiling ushers to clean restrooms—need to be addressed.

Cherished ideas of ministry need to be challenged. Congregations have fallen in the rut of "chaplancy ministry" where the pastor takes care of the flock and the laity pays the bills. This is not what the priesthood of believers is meant to be, and it has hamstrung the Church's ministry. People do not have a lot of time. They want the time they do volunteer to be in meaningful, life-touching ministry—not sitting on a committee. Pastors need to give up some cherished roles, and lay people need to be trained for new opportunities of service.

Community is the final vital area to address. People are looking for meaningful relationships. Medium-sized and large

er congregations are forming small groups to meet this need. Some congregations are not big enough to warrant small groups. The central question is, "Is the congregation the place people can come for acceptance, support, prayer, and spiritual growth?" Fellowship needs to be more than what happens over donut holes and coffee on Sunday morning.

Rural America is a great place to live and minister, but it is not for the faint of heart or the weak of faith. It is a chal-

lenging mission field, where every congregation is called to make it a little more like heaven than it already is. □



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Mission Witness Conversion



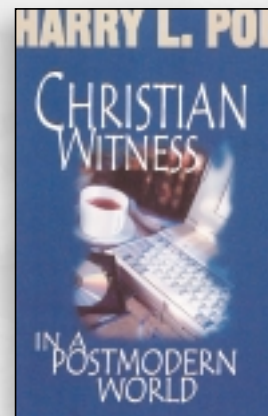
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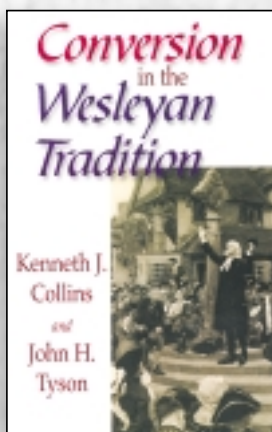
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