

According to Their Ability: Church Growth in Small and Rural Locations



By David Oaks

After thirty-two years in pastoral ministry, I have come to see three great influences upon my experience. These might be summarized by that famous line from business that states the most important thing is “location, location, and location.” Let me explain.

Geographic Location

My first location, where most of my ministry has taken place, is in rural western Kentucky. As I drove into town for the first time, the city workers were taking down the population sign which read 2,200 and putting one up that said only 2,000. This, I would learn, was a sign of things to come. The coal mines were closing, jobs were scarce, and people, especially the young, were off to college and then away to wherever their careers might call them. Few would return home except to visit.

Don't get me wrong, this is a wonderful place to live and raise children. It's just that the benefits of the big city are hours away. Many young people want something more and they are leaving us. This greatly affects our families and I find it also affects the way we do ministry here.

Historical Location

My second location is the historical context of my geographic area. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Kentucky was known as the frontier. Preachers were assigned to areas where there were, at times, no established churches at all. Classes were formed in homes until numbers would allow the building of a church. Preachers traveled many miles and often didn't return to a congregation for weeks or months. It was up to the laity in those places to build the church while their clergy leader was away.

At any given opportunity, the preacher might speak to only a handful of people at a time. Yet the idea of bringing the gospel to an unchurched land was exciting. Preachers poured out their lives to advance the church. It was said by preachers from other denominations that they seldom came to any town, rural community, or family farm where a circuit-riding Methodist had not already been.

The joy that encouraged the circuit riders was that, while they may have rarely spoken to large assemblies (with the possible exception of the Great Revival of 1800) or built giant Gothic structures, the church was growing by leaps and bounds, one person at a time. The opportunity to share the love of Christ with a family in

their home and then link them with other families, no matter how far apart, made the endeavor worth giving one's life for, as many of those early preachers did.

Contextual Location

My third location is within a particular denomination at a specific time in its history. Back in my seminary days in Nashville, I did a study of the General Board of Discipleship's mid-1970s analysis of our decline in membership. The Board found that the numbers of persons leaving the Church by transfer or death had not changed dramatically over the years but the number of professions of faith, bringing new persons in, had declined tremendously. Since that time, and for my whole ministry, at almost every gathering on the district, conference, or general church level, practically every speaker has lamented this reality, and yet we seem unable to turn things around.

Church growth, or the desire for it, is a perpetual emphasis of our denomination. It touches everything we do, as well it should. Looking for answers over the years, we have turned to models that have worked in other places. The problem is that the locations of these models share little similarity with my ministry location or that of most United Methodist churches.

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Our congregation recently studied a church that started from nothing and grew to over 10,000 in attendance. It is a great story, but it happened in the fastest growing county in the United States. How do you translate that into a county with a population of less than 14,000? Where are examples of churches starting with less than fifty people and growing beyond all expectations in a small town or rural area? Show me a church with only a few thousand people to draw from where there is growth in the hundreds. That would be an even greater miracle than a church of 10,000 out of hundreds of thousands!

In The United Methodist Church, pastors promise to serve where sent. We have limited input into where we minister. Young ministers are often appointed to small parishes and then, if they don't

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mess up too badly, they are rewarded with a larger opportunity. We need to understand, however, how important these smaller ministries are to a denomination of small churches. We can't just sit and wait for a large church when we have already been given a field of service. How different things are today from what happened in Kentucky two hundred years ago.

According to Their Ability

Today we seem to think that evangelism done on a small scale is not worth our time. We look for megachurches in big cities with a myriad of ministries available to a large number of people. And this is great. We need those ministries in those places, but should we give up on rural America? Are there no models for reaching persons who live in what could still be called the frontier? Our goal should be for the church to advance, whether we bring in thousands in a large city ministry or dozens in the open country.

There is a parable of Jesus which speaks to this issue; it is the parable of the talents (found in Matthew 25:14-30). A property owner is going on a protracted trip and he summons his slaves to hold some of his money until his return. To one slave he gives five talents, to another two, and a third is given only one talent. The parable

says that the talents were invested with the slaves "according to their ability."

Because of the play on the word "talent," we often hear sermons where the investment made by the landowner is compared to gifts and abilities God gives individuals today, and therefore assume that the five talents were given to the slave who displayed the greatest ability, while those given less were less able. But that is not what the scripture says. It only says that the talents were given in *relation to their ability*.

It could just as easily be assumed that the slave with the greatest ability was given the one talent because he had the skills to produce a great increase, while those who were given more were expected to do less. After all, it is easier to make more money when you start with more. The slave who was given one talent might have been the most able of the whole group but buried what he had and returned no interest because he assumed he couldn't do much because he started with so little. What he didn't realize was that to have returned one new talent along with the one that he was given would have been at least as great an accomplishment as returning five with five.

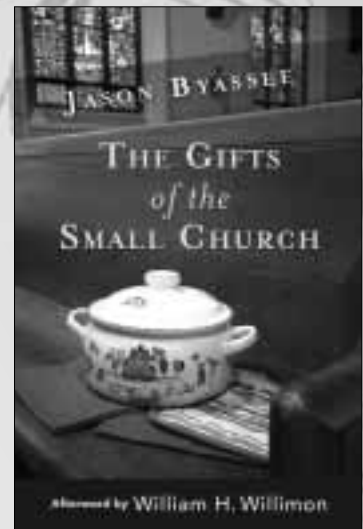
For us today, the location in which we live and work represents our talents. Some have been given much and God will expect much in return. For those of us, however, who find ourselves in smaller communities, with fewer people and resources, we are not exempt from God's expectations and should not assume we are less skilled than those in larger appointments. We may have to work just as hard or even harder to see what may seem a smaller increase. Still, remember we are not alone. If all the servants in all the small churches around the world would see a small increase, the cumulative effect would be large indeed.

If we find that we start with less, rather than burying our opportunity, we should be overjoyed because of God's confidence. After all, if God believes we can do something with one talent, perhaps God sees in us more ability than we realized. □



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