

**Small & Slow: Rural Ecclesiology and Effective Missional Praxis**

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Organic Forms within the Vineyard

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As the Vineyard explores, develops, articulates, and questions ecclesiological convictions, one might wonder *which* theologians, traditions, or groups will inform and shape our ecclesiology. After all, theology is *not* done in a vacuum and “in all academic writing, authors have their own agendas and influences that determine the nature of their work.”<sup>2</sup> Thus questions remain in regards to which voices will influence our ecclesiological decisions. While it may be true that *historically* the Vineyard’s influence has come via the Evangelical and Charismatic traditions,<sup>3</sup> a significant influence amongst Vineyard *pastors* and *churches* is related to a sub-discipline of Practical Theology, namely that which is *pragmatic*.<sup>4</sup>

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore and suggest that combining what can only be described as “small town ecclesiology” (i.e., rural church) with “small town missional praxis” could serve as a healthy, constructive and transformative resource for the Vineyard movement to consider in its quest toward developing a distinct ecclesiology. In fact, I might be so bold as to suggest that healthy Vineyard churches, and I do mean to stress *health*, in small towns are crucial to the movement’s health, longevity, sustainability, and continuation as a missional church planting movement. Integrating constructive, empirical,<sup>5</sup> and practical theological methodology from the perspective of a Vineyard pastor, missional practitioner, and aspiring theologian, this

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the suggestions of my fellow co-leaders of the Small Town USA partnership of Multiply Vineyard, Joel Seymour (Lancaster Vineyard Church, Lancaster, OH) and Ross Nelson (Northwoods Vineyard Church, Tomahawk, WI).

<sup>2</sup> Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers, and Cornelis van der Laan, *Studying Global Pentecostalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bill Jackson, *The Quest for the Radical Middle: A History of the Vineyard* (Cape Town: Vineyard International Publishing, 1999); Rich Nathan and Ken Wilson, *Empowered Evangelicals: Bringing Together the Best of the Evangelical and Charismatic Worlds* (Boise: Ampelton Publishing, 1995, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Though outside the scope of this paper, I would suggest this is largely due to the influence of John Wimber and the Church Growth movement; cf. Gary L. McIntosh, ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), esp. 16–18. See also Rick Williams, *Uncomfortable Growth* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; 1 edition, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> For a good discussion on empirical research methodology in relation to the discipline of Practical Theology, see Mark J. Cartledge’s essay “Practical Theology” in *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 268–285.

paper is written unashamedly from a Small Town USA perspective. In other words, this is my attempt to integrate a variety of methods, ideas, and experiences from an intentionally rural missional context.

### **The *Missio Dei* and Opportunities in Small Town USA**

Churches in America face many challenges. The unfortunate reality is that “Western Christianity has... adopted shortcuts”<sup>6</sup> and both ecclesiology and the *Missio Dei*, inseparable issues,<sup>7</sup> have suffered because of it. Western Christianity often values success at all costs and individualization is a defining hallmark. Imperialism and colonialism have more influences upon this type of “ecclesiology” than we may care to acknowledge,<sup>8</sup> an issue that is counter-productive to a healthy global Church, partnering with the Spirit as sent one’s on God’s mission.

When the Church begins to measure success based *primarily* upon the number of *attendees* and/or the size of a building, and/or how much money is collected, questions need to be raised.<sup>9</sup> Surely there is more to a healthy church characterized by missional discipleship than large buildings and budgets!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006) and *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). See also N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers, and Cornelis van der Laan, *Studying Global Pentecostalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 51-73; Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111.

<sup>9</sup> To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that numeric growth or financial stewardship are unimportant! Rather, I’m suggesting that our ability to determine health in both the life and mission of the Church must consider other important issues. In what follows I will argue that the mission of urban, suburban, and rural communities is the same because that mission is *God’s* mission and the multiplication of disciples (numeric growth) matters! As an example of this type of measure of success, one needs to only point to the recent imposition of Mars Hill Church (Seattle, WA) pastored by Mark Driscoll. This church is now closed.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that building or budget size does not matter or is unimportant; rather, they are not the foremost ways to determine whether a church is healthy, growing, missional, etc. These issues must be taken as relative and proportional to the context.

Vineyard churches must embrace the tensions created by mission, discipleship, spiritual transformation, health, and all that aligns itself under the umbrella of spiritual formation and ecclesiology. Only with thoughtful reflection, a value to integrate healthy missional models, and a desire to build toward a robustly rich ecclesiology will we avoid common ecclesial missteps.

This, of course, raises the issue of what exactly the mission of the church *is*. I agree with Wright when he suggests that:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation... It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God's mission.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, this *missional* lean must be articulated in partnership with how the Third Lausanne Congress connects mission with Spirit:

We love the Holy Spirit within the unity of the Trinity, along with God the Father and God the Son. He is the missionary Spirit sent by the missionary Father and the missionary Son, breathing life and power into God's missionary church. We love and pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit because without the witness of the Spirit to Christ, our own witness is futile. Without the convicting work of the Spirit, our preaching is in vain. Without the gifts, guidance and power of the Spirit, our mission is mere human effort. And without the fruit of the Spirit, our unattractive lives cannot reflect the beauty of the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

This certainly lines up with how the Vineyard movement articulates its pneumatological mission. John Wimber stated that in the Vineyard “we place a priority on being empowered by the Holy Spirit” because “the Spirit empowers for a purpose” as we “seek the active presence of the Spirit to continue Jesus' ministry.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23, 63.

<sup>12</sup> “The Cape Town Commitment,” last modified April 15, 2015, ” <http://www.lausanne.org/ctcommitment>.

<sup>13</sup> Christy Wimber, *The Way In is the Way On: John Wimber's teachings and writings on life in Christ* (Boise: Ampelton Publishing, 2006), Kindle Location 1658.

God's Mission is to make himself known<sup>14</sup> in connection with both the christological and pneumatological redemption<sup>15</sup> of his good creation.<sup>16</sup> *This mission exists as in invitation and command for the global church in both urban, suburban and rural contexts.* Yet small town contexts are largely overlooked both as a mission field and as an ecclesiological example. Who wants to plant a church in rural America? Why would anyone ever consider a small town church as a healthy model to follow? Questions such as these assume much about God's mission *and* the nature of ecclesiology. With all due respect to Columbus, Anaheim, and a host of other wonderful Vineyard's in urban or suburban locations, small town USA must be considered an equal participant in ecclesiological dialogue.

Rural America is often overlooked because the "majority" of people live in suburban and urban locations. According to the 2010 census,<sup>17</sup> 249,253,271 people (80.7% of the population) live in urban settings. These numbers have led to an enormous amount of the church's missional focus addressing urbanized contexts.<sup>18</sup> However, according to that same study, rural areas contain 59,492,276 people (19.3% of the population). Fifty-nine million people are a *lot* of

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<sup>14</sup> Wright states that "If YHWH alone is the one true living God who made himself known in Israel and who wills to be known to the ends of the earth, then our mission can contemplate no lesser goal," *The Mission of God*, Kindle Location 804.

<sup>15</sup> On christological and pneumatological approaches, from both biblical scholars and theologians, see Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 142–143; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); T. David Beck, *The Holy Spirit and the Renewal of All Things: Pneumatology in Paul and Jürgen Moltmann* (Eugene: Pickwick 2007); Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*.

<sup>17</sup> "FAQ's," last modified April 15, 2015, <https://ask.census.gov/faq.php?id=5000&faqId=5971>.

<sup>18</sup> One of the most frustrating examples of this Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). *Why Cities Matter* offers some excellent reflections on urban missional contextualization but has nothing practical to offer rural practitioners. This same issue is found in Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes, eds., *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014). The fact of the matter is that the majority of missional theological works is glaringly without any focus upon rural America. While rural ecclesial practitioners are certainly able to and *do* mine these works for helpful missional theological reflection and application, the fact that there are fifty-nine million people living in small towns suggests to me that *someone* needs to make this a priority! Hence, the Small Town USA of Multiply Vineyard!

people and certainly qualifies as part of Jesus' statement that "the harvest is plentiful" (Matt. 9:37).

In addition to the missional opportunities related to fifty-nine million people living in rural America, the ecclesiological practices of small town Vineyard churches implicitly embody theology and practices that should be *just as* considered, engaged, and where found helpful, influential in shaping Vineyard ecclesiology as urban and suburban churches.

In what follows, I offer five small town ecclesiological reflections and missional practices that could shape a distinct Vineyard approach to the doctrine of the Church.

### **Small Town Ecclesiology and Missional Practice**

**(1) Healthy small town ecclesiology embraces the importance of relationship.** As the *ekklesia* is the "called out ones"<sup>19</sup> that form the "community of the kingdom,"<sup>20</sup> healthy rural Vineyard churches can help shape Vineyard ecclesiology in that they are imbedded with a relational ethos that *assumes* the value of "neighborliness."<sup>21</sup> Relationships mean a great deal in small town Vineyards because social networks are smaller, inviting all of the challenges that come along with human interaction. This causes rural Vineyard pastors to incorporate the "one another"<sup>22</sup> texts in their preaching on a regular basis because to ignore these community commandments leads to ecclesiological "death." However, this is *not* simply a "small town"

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<sup>19</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303–304; William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 110.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); W. Scott Moore, *Rural Revival: Growing Churches in Shrinking Communities* (Rogersville: Eleos Press, 2012), Kindle Electronic Edition: Kindle Locations 723-726.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rom. 12:10, 14:19, 15:7; Col. 3:16; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:2; 1 Cor. 12:25; 1 Thess. 4:18, 5:11; etc.

issue because the importance of relationships and “one-anothering” is essential for all healthy churches, regardless of context or size.

The interconnectedness of small town America requires a significant investment in social engagement along with relationship and communication skills. After all, in small towns “[p]eople are searching for friendly churches”<sup>23</sup> and community “is a central value in most effective churches” because “community is central to its mission.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, “engagement in a rural community means becoming part of that community and learning to value both its strengths and its peculiarities.”<sup>25</sup> The incarnational posture<sup>26</sup> is absolutely essential to both evangelism and making disciples in small towns.

The negative fall out of under-developing and not maintaining a healthy community has an enormous affect upon the health of a small town church’s ontology and mission. Offending people in the church and/or surrounding community, *and not dealing with it*, can significantly affect the quality of your community life as well as the effectiveness of mission. For example, if you offend someone in the local church and avoid conflict resolution, word quickly spreads and the work of the kingdom is negatively affected. Small town communities are inter-connected in a way that can only be described as a rural version of the television show *Cheers*: everyone knows your name.

**(2) Healthy small town ecclesiology and praxis embraces substance over style.** While church growth principles *can* be helpful, they must be evaluated.<sup>27</sup> I have significant concerns

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<sup>23</sup> Moore, *Rural Revival*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Kindle Location 725.

<sup>24</sup> Bob Terry, “Ten Tips Identified For Postmodern Worship,” *The Alabama Baptist*, April 12, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Shannon Jung, et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 198.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Michael Frost, *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> For critical engagement with the church growth movement and/or church growth principles, see Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003). Also see Craig Van Gelder, “Gospel and Our Culture View: Church Growth Lacks a Sufficient View of the Church, Which Hinders It from Effectively Engaging the Culture,” 75-102, and Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Reformist View: Church Growth Assumes Theology but

about an over-emphasis on *style* and *form* over and above issues of substance and function. In the same way that “[b]usinesses have shifted resources from research and development to marketing and public relations” and as “[p]oliticians have become more concerned with sound bites and slogans than with policies and platforms,” the Church in the western world has entered into an “age of style over substance.”<sup>28</sup> This has resulted in confusion over the primary substance of ecclesiological gatherings. While early first-century followers of Jesus “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”<sup>29</sup> as they focused on proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God along the path of God’s Mission. Yet many churches today focus more on smoke and laser-light rock concerts.<sup>30</sup> In many of these churches, the Eucharist has become simply an add-on or its place is minimized. In my own personal research I have found that many rural Vineyard churches regularly celebrate the Eucharist either weekly or, at the minimum, on the first Sunday of the month.

Furthermore, in healthy small town Vineyard churches, style *over* substance will not last. People in small towns are far more interested in character, longevity, and consistency. This interest in substance and longevity is related to what W. Scott Moore describes as the advantage of the “the perseverance of the rural church.”<sup>31</sup> Because small town churches are considered “the ‘convenor of community,’” many have acknowledged that the rural church “out-survives even the local tavern!”<sup>32</sup> Since longevity is deeply connected to substance, emphasizing style and form over and above the importance of function and meaning must be seriously engaged. If

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Ineffectively Employs It to Analyze Culture, Determine Strategy, and Perceive History,” 165–189, both in McIntosh, ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*.

<sup>28</sup> Dave Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 60.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 2:42.

<sup>30</sup> While outside the scope of this paper, this is not to suggest that these things are “evil” per say; rather, I take significant issue if smoke and lights is valued more than the Lord’s Table!

<sup>31</sup> Moore, *Rural Revival*, Kindle Location 288.

<sup>32</sup> Pegge Boehm, et. al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 21.



pragmatism, style, and form are the only concerns, consistency and longevity become difficult to sustain. “Fruitfulness is,” as Phil Strout has noted, “different than fruitful longevity.”<sup>33</sup> If our only concern is about *immediacy*, we can easily mistake “fruit” for what will eventually be revealed to be at best distractions or, at worst, weeds, thorns, or bad fruit.<sup>34</sup> Healthy small town ecclesiology and praxis takes these issues serious because they *have* to in order to have missional effectiveness.

**(3) Healthy small town ecclesiology and praxis assumes the concept of “Parish Priest.”**<sup>35</sup> While this can certainly lead to some problematic biblical, theological, and practical issues,<sup>36</sup> when approached through a contextual missional lens, the “parish priest” concept has much to offer the Vineyard. John Wesley famously stated, “I look upon all the world as my parish.”<sup>37</sup> In small towns, pastors must understand that they are viewed as pastors of the entire city, town, or village. In rural communities the role of a pastor can be so important that some suggest “the pastor is overwhelmingly important in any congregational evangelism program.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Phil Strout, *Thrive: How to Successfully Navigate the S-Turns of Leadership* (Boise: Ampelton Publishing, 2013), Kindle Electronic Edition: Kindle Location 315.

<sup>34</sup> Matt. 7:18; 12:33; 13:24-30; Heb. 6:8.

<sup>35</sup> Helpful reflection on the concept of “parish” and missional theology, including the idea of “a pastor who seemed to know all his neighbors,” is found in Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014). The authors write:

“The new parish calls forth a new way of leading. It doesn’t change the need for leadership. Leadership is always going to be necessary. The task of pastoring a group of people into this new vision may very well be the leadership challenge of the twenty-first-century church” (p. 181).

<sup>36</sup> Vineyard churches and leaders in small towns must commit to the principles of “everyone gets to play” and “equipping the saints,” regardless of the cultural assumption that the pastors are the ministers. The same issues of accountability, servant hood, grace, love, and pride that plague churches in large cities can and do plague churches in rural America.

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951).

<sup>38</sup> Kevin E. Ruffcorn, *Rural Evangelism: Catching the Vision* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 22.

Small town America is a glass house with a glass ceiling. Pastors, if they intend to be effective toward making disciples in God’s mission, must take seriously the call to live “above reproach.”<sup>39</sup> Joel Seymour explains this well:

I grew up in a village where a local pastor helped to coach football teams. His temper and foul mouth against refs and players alike were well known in the village. Anytime the topic of faith came up at my high school that pastor’s name soon came up. The feeling was ‘if that’s how church leaders are then I don’t need to go to church. I’m already like that but at least I’m not a hypocrite’. Small towns remind us that our church’s reputation is our greatest asset (besides God) and it’s the hardest thing to get back when we lose it.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, due to the influential role that pastors hold in small towns, significant reflection and discussion must take place concerning the expectations that churches and rural communities have upon pastors. On the negative front, unhealthy expectations can be assumed and this can seriously damage the pastor’s family.<sup>41</sup> If the expectations are not challenged, those unhealthy assumptions can continue to function as a “job description.” Yet on the positive side, because of the value that small towns place upon the role of church leaders, pastors have a tremendous amount of influence, which if assumed with humility, love, and a commitment to God’s mission, can help shape culture and be used for the good of the kingdom.

**(4) Healthy small town ecclesiology requires “everyone gets to play” praxis.** The initial and pragmatic reason for this is largely due to the fact that small town churches often have to integrate *everyone* to function as a healthy congregation. While national averages regarding membership participation suggests that only twenty percent of congregations are actively involved,<sup>42</sup> small town churches often have a much higher percentage.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6-7.

<sup>40</sup> Joel Seymour, e-mail message to author, March 24, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Barnabas Piper, *The Pastor's Kid: Finding Your Own Faith and Identity* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

A contributing factor, in healthy small town Vineyard churches, to the common involvement of both those recognized in formal leadership roles and members/attendees is likely due to a shared commitment to modeling the “everyone gets to play” approach to ecclesiology. Built upon the “priesthood of all believers”<sup>44</sup> framework, this Vineyard value is essential to carrying out God’s mission in rural America. Additionally, many small town Vineyard pastors are bi-vocational,<sup>45</sup> which instantly “levels the playing field” while also providing numerous missional opportunities for the working pastor.<sup>46</sup>

**(4.5) Excursus: Small towns are *excellent* and *ripe* contexts for women to serve in all areas of ministry.** Mainline denominations have been sending, appointing, and ordaining women to rural America for decades. If the Vineyard truly values and affirms the equal participation and call of women to all areas of ministry within the Church,<sup>47</sup> rural America should be considered a welcome context for healthy and effective ministry. Though outside the scope of this paper, an egalitarian approach is just as acceptable in “unchurched” rural America as urban centers due to sociological issues, not to mention the most convincing reading of Scripture and theological reflection.

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<sup>43</sup> For a healthy explanation of leadership development in small towns, see Tom Nebel, *Big Dreams in Small Places: Church Planting in Smaller Communities* (St. Charles: ChurchSmart, 2002), 85-88. On the relationship between pastors and congregational activity, see Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 194-221.

<sup>44</sup> Though the lack of academic study on the subject is startling, for helpful works see Cyril Easterwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present* (London: Epworth Press, 1960); Alex T. M. Cheung, “The Priest as the Redeemed Man: A Biblical-Theological Study of the Priesthood,” *JETS* 29/3 (1986): 265-275; Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Dennis W. Bickers, *The Tentmaking Pastor: The Joy of Bivocational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); Dennis Bickers, *The Bivocational Pastor: Two Jobs, One Ministry* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2004), Dennis W. Bickers, *The Work of the Bivocational Minister* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2007); Ray Glider, *Uniquely Bivocational: Understanding the Life of a Pastor Who Has a Second Job* (self published, 2013); James W. Highland, *Serving as a Bivocational Pastor* (Newburgh Press, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> One excellent opportunity for bivocational pastors would be to work in the educational field, specifically elementary schools.

<sup>47</sup> For Vineyard statements concerning women in ministry, see Rich Nathan, “Women in Leadership: How to Decide What the Bible Teaches?”; also see the excellent essay “The Biblical Case for Ordaining Women” in N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 64-82;

In the Area I serve in, married couples are the most common example of church leadership, with wives and husbands serving side by side. In fact, in one of the churches a woman provides the primary “up front” ministry and several of the people who are in the process of planting churches in Northern WI are women... and I gladly will do all that I can to receive ministry *from* them and minister *alongside* them!

Simply stated: rural America needs the voice and touch of women empowered by the Spirit to minister the reconciliation of God’s kingdom.

**(5) Healthy small town Vineyards can help renew and redefine what “success” looks like.** While many churches are stuck in the pandoran box of “nickels and noses” as the primary concern, healthy small town Vineyard churches offer a more robustly biblical, theological, and practical way to assess both health and success. While refusing to swing the pendulum toward an assumption that church growth doesn’t matter or that setting missional goals is ineffective, rural Vineyard churches emphasize evangelism, discipleship, and community/cultural engagement with qualitative and contextual awareness. As small town Vineyard churches are, in the words of Christopher Wright, “people who are redeemed for redemptive living” as they “represent God to the world,” they “attract others to God” while “proclaiming the Gospel of Christ,”<sup>48</sup> the primary purposes of the Church is to minister reconciliation and redemption to the world. This is fleshed out, to use a fully intended incarnational pun, in the small town culture by engaging with the community and sharing the love of Christ through the relational context in practical ways.

Thus, questions related to how “successful” a small town Vineyard are as follows: How many people in the local community consider that specific Vineyard their church? What type of influence does the church have amongst the local community? Do the local businesses and organizations consider working alongside the local church as a positive experience? How many

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<sup>48</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*.

church members/attendees are involved in missional engagement within the city's already established social groupings and gatherings?

While this may be more anecdotal for some readers, in the small town Vineyard church that I serve as a pastor, we have approximately 12.5% of the city population that attends our worship gatherings and, if we expand to include the cities that are part of our "circle of influence," 6% of the surrounding community. *This gives us a tremendous amount of influence and we are able to shape the culture in significant ways for the kingdom of God.* While questions related to what we will *do* with our influence are important, ecclesiological *ontology* might prompt us to first ask *what* we exist for, or perhaps for *whom* do we exist. Might we exist for both God's glory and the good of all people, even those in rural America?

### **Conclusion**

As has been stated elsewhere, Vineyard practices are often much healthier and more helpful than what is unstated and/or assumed in our theology. In healthy small town Vineyard churches, the potential for engaging with rural cultures in order to create opportunities for the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God exist in ways that *demand* our attention. Fifty-nine million people are a *lot* of people. Yet Jesus also indicated that were there "one lost sheep,"<sup>49</sup> he would go after her because "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v. 7). In small town America there are humans everywhere. Let's go where the humans are.

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<sup>49</sup> Luke 15:1-7.

### **Recommend Resources for Small Town Church**

Boehm, Pegge, et. al. *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.

Browning, Dave. *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Jung, Shannon, et al. *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Moore, W. Scott. *Rural Revival: Growing Churches in Shrinking Communities*. Rogersville: Eleos Press, 2012.

Ruffcorn, Kevin E. *Rural Evangelism: Catching the Vision*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

Vaters, Karl. *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches, and the Small Thinking that Divides Us*. New Small Church, 2012.

### **Recommend Resources for Missional Theology**

Carter, Matt, Darrin Patrick, and Joel Lindsey. *For the City: Proclaiming and Living Out the Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Chester, Tim and Steve Timmis. *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008.

Frost, Michael. *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Logan, Robert E. *Missional Journey: Multiplying Disciples and Churches that Transform the World*. Bellevue: Missional Challenge, 2013.

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