

2025 Rural Churches Today Research Study

Key Findings from Rural Protestant Pastor Qualitative Research

Sponsored by

Rural Church Institute, Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

The Rural Home Missionary Association

Center for Rural Ministry at Grove City College

Lifewayresearch

Methodology

- The study was sponsored by Center for Rural Ministry at Grove City College, The Rural Home Missionary Association, and Rural Church Institute, Wheaton College Billy Graham Center with funding provided by the Lilly Endowment.
- Rural pastors were invited to participate in 3-day discussion boards using two sources of probability sample:
 - Email invites to pastors recruited on previous phone surveys of random samples of Protestant churches in rural areas using an online screener
 - Phone surveys among a random selection of Protestant churches in rural areas
- Rural churches were identified based on their zip code being in RUCA codes 7 to 10 (Rural-Urban Community Area Codes).
- The first discussion board was conducted May 13-15, 2025 with 41 pastors active in the discussion.
- The second discussion board was conducted May 20-22, 2025 with 35 pastors active in the discussion.

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Foundational Themes

tell the story of a few underlying patterns in the discussions among pastors

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illustrate the breadth of rural ministry practices to aid quantitative survey development

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Foundational Theme 1

FAITHFUL PRESENCE

Presence is the first step for ministry

Presence-based pastoral ministry

- Presence-based ministry relies on relational investment and consistent engagement
- Sustained presence builds trust and fosters long-term relationships
- Ordinary spaces become places of ministry: Coffee shops, McDonalds, football games, council meetings, schools
- Interruptible: Available when people need to talk
- Long-term visibility – being seen on a consistent basis matters
- Just showing up matters

Value of presence in their words...

- "I spend intentional time working outside of my home and office in order to connect with other people in my community. I try to spend at least one morning each week working from our local coffee shop and I always look for opportunities to buy someone's coffee as a reflection of the grace and generosity of God. I also help coach our high school boys basketball team, and I teach chess in the elementary school."
- "I feel by showing up in the community at local events, especially fundraisers for local fire departments, or school teammate's program, builds a relationship between mission and the church."
- "I agree! Presence is key. Showing up says hey your pastor thought you were important enough to take/spend their time and energy at your event or visiting you. I am beginning to realize that time is a more valuable resource than money."
- "I take one morning a week to "study" at McDonalds. Not much study gets done, but over the course of two years I have become a fixture in that seat on that day. I now have people come by to say hello and some to sit down and talk about needs in their life or questions they have. Being present and visible is everything."
- "The first time that I went to a football game, someone said, "We have never ever had a pastor come to our games." While in this event, I didn't sit down with an individual to share the gospel, my presence built relationships that the entire town was talking about."
- "I am currently walking with a family through the loss of a loved one. We didn't have much of a relationship before, but now that I have been present in this pivotal moment of their lives they all of a sudden want me involved in other areas."
- **And the converse was also voiced:** "One of the biggest hinderances to sharing my faith "far and wide" is that I do not run into very many unchurched people each week. I spend my days at the church and my evenings at home with my young family."

Foundational Theme 2

TRUST THROUGH TIME

Building trust through consistent reliability

Trust as generational currency

- A church's trust is built over generations through small, consistent actions
- Trust creates openness to a church's message and activities
- A pastor's trust is like a bank account, where deposits and withdrawals are made through everyday interactions and responses to crises
- Losing trust can take years to rebuild

Methods of building trust

- Serving the community/volunteering
- Conducting events for the community
- Participating in the events the community puts on
- Following through on minor commitments
- Mastering confidentiality
- Cultural respect
- Demonstrating the same values privately and publicly (because in rural areas, there's really no such thing as private)

Methods of building trust in their words...

- “Being engaged in community activities, being here long-term, investing in the community, being present and participating in community events (showing up to band performances, football games, farmers markets, etc.”
- “I have only been here for less than two years but these programs [food bank and VBS] have been here for over 50 yrs.”
- “I think the community-minded ministries of the Food Pantry, Apple Butter Festival, and the annual Trunk or Treat event establish church or group trust in our community. This trust takes a significant period of time to build.”
- “I feel by showing up in the community at local events, especially fundraisers for local fire departments, or school teammates program, builds a relationship between mission and the church. For me, I have lived in a neighboring community serving on many teams along the way. As a volunteer, the most important way to build trust is to show up! ”
- “In a rural setting trust is built through relationships in the community. Showing up for events in the community, like the Christmas parade or the Veteran's Day celebration, shows that I care about what is happening outside of my congregation.”
- Community engagement has been the most helpful... working at every election ... regular time at the nursing home ..., and I volunteer for community events. Officiating funerals ... assisting the community as much as possible following a natural disaster. All together, I would say it took about 8 years before the community really started to think of me as one of their own.”

Foundational Theme 3

CRISIS RESPONSE EXCELLENCE

Crises are moments of truth that you care

Rural communities expect their neighbors to help in times of crisis

In rural communities, churches are one of a limited set of resources to face challenges when they arise. People remember who stood beside them when it counted.

- Personal crises: deaths, suicides, medical emergencies, mental health concerns, human trafficking, addiction issues, divorce, etc.
- Natural disasters
- Economic downturns

Presence in crises in their words...

- “Credibility is built one funeral or pastoral care visit at a time. Once I have done some ministry for a community member in their time of need, I went from being referred to as “the new pastor” and became “our pastor.” I also think consistency is important. I try to tell people what I will do, and then do it over and over again. No surprises.”
- “Being there for their life events: weddings, funerals, births, birthday parties, kid’s ballgames, etc., helped build acceptance and trust.”
- “The opportunity to do funerals for community members who do not have pastors has been a huge part of building trust within my community.”
- “We teach the practice of hospitality, and we teach serving people and our community. We tangibly serve people who are in crisis.”
- “Everyone knows everyone, and that causes everyone to come together in times of struggle or crisis.”

Foundational Theme 4

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Sustainable rural ministry requires distributing leadership responsibilities

Developing and empowering lay leaders

- If leadership and credibility rests on one pastor, it leaves when they do
- Pastors commend churches with a culture of volunteer leadership
- Need to help members identify their gifts and strengths
- Teaching skills, setting expectations, and mentoring
- Giving them more responsibility over time

Sharing leadership in their words...

- “I find that a church in which dedicated volunteers do the work of the church is much healthier than a church which hires people to do the work of the church.”
- “I have always been in churches staffed by volunteers. Sometimes it is difficult to have people volunteer, but usually they have a passion for their position.”
- Greatest needs: “Duplication and leadership development in the shepherding roles. Because pastors cannot do it alone.”
- “We have entry level serving and as they prove themselves, we offer them greater areas of leadership. We have seen good initiative in this age group for serving and a desire for leadership.”

Foundational Theme 5

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Personal relationships often precede openness to the message of the gospel

Love and care for neighbors is gospel living

- Many of the outreach activities of a church are not expected to yield direct conversions, they are expected to start new relationships

“We host several community service projects each year including a clothing drive, a community Trunk or Treat for Halloween, and meals for Thanksgiving. Those have not resulted directly in bringing people to Christ, but **they do begin and strengthen relationships** within the community, **which opens opportunities for personal evangelism**”

- Relationships make evangelistic conversations credible

Members developing relationships in their words...

- “I have quit doing things to get butts in the pews. I can't genuinely befriend someone with a goal to only benefit me. I genuinely want someone to follow Christ whether they come to my church or not.”
- Any formal evangelistic efforts has failed horribly. It's only when people "accidentally" invite that we actually see evangelism happen. Its parents sharing stories about VBS and neighbors inviting new neighbors to soup supper that actually works.”
- “The best evangelism that works is actually individual people living Christ and sharing their faith with people they contact- not a program but an outflowing of their own faith.”
- “The ONE method that has been successful is person-to-person relationships.”
- “I began my ministry here cultivating a culture of love, and I am so pleased with the deep relationships that I can observe between my church members on a regular basis. That's the foundation I would like to build on as I work to cultivate a culture of evangelism now. Having a loving community to welcome new believers was the first step, but now we need to equip and encourage members to share their faith.”
- “We have seen some success with our members developing relationships with their neighbors and will be baptizing someone as a result in the near future.”
- “The best approaches that seem to be working right now is personal, one on one, evangelism. People talking to their friends and family brings the most success.”

DRIVERS FOR RURAL PASTORS

Motivations, Indicators of Success, and Sources of Joy

Motivations for Staying in Rural Ministry

- Obeying God's calling
- Loving the people
- Long-term relationships
- Enjoying the small-town life
- Serving the community/town
- Being present for _____ (everyday community life)
- The church needs a pastor to stay
- There are many non-Christians in the community
- The community has many needs
- There is a great need for rural pastors
- The gifts I have/I am making a difference

Indicators of Success in Rural Ministry

- Seeing someone take a step toward Jesus
- Teens showing up or showing leadership
- Surprise conversations or encounters
- I know the stories of people in my community
- Changed lives, reconciliation
- Consistent presence and care
- Community impact
- Stability through hardship
- Fellowship
- Fruit from the Spirit
- When asked to be involved in other activities in the community

Indicators of Success in Rural Ministry *Continued*

- Faithfulness
- Leadership maturity
- When members volunteer and serve their neighbors
- Numerical growth
- Spiritual growth
- People seeking to share the good news
- When children raised in the church get involved with their families
- When people are invited/new faces
- People engaging beyond Sunday morning
- When new people are welcomed
- Those without faith coming to Christ/baptisms

Sources of Joy in Rural Ministry

- Teaching/preaching
- Walking alongside my people listening to how God has shaped them
- Connections people have in the church and community (laughter, care, support for each other)
- 20-somethings coming back to church
- Changed lives
- Health of leaders
- Partnerships with other rural churches
- Churches of different denominations loving each other
- New families
- People responding positively to the liturgy
- Seeing church embrace people from various ethnic backgrounds
- Teens/kids wanting to come
- Working with people who are on mission in the work of the kingdom

RURAL EVANGELISM

Effective Practices, Factors in conversion stories, and Evangelism Activities

Effective evangelism practices

- It was not uncommon for pastors to list many activities and then say that they had no evidence that anyone came to Christ through those activities
- Individual people living Christ, developing relationships with neighbors and sharing their faith
- Invitations to church/"come and hear" approach
- Camp
- Free community meal
- Church present and participating in community events (e.g., Prayer booth at fair)
- Events at the church for the community
- Serving the community
- Small group Bible studies (people invited who don't attend church)

Factors in recent conversion stories

- Several have had none for several years
- Personal relationships (some take years)
- Crisis/person hits rock bottom
- Being accepted by the church
- Response to current shape of the world and culture
- One-on-one conversations
- Invite them to non-typical church activities (e.g., picnic, kid's program)
- Praying for lost people they know
- GriefShare

Other evangelism activities

- VBS
- Youth ministry
- AWANA
- Community worship service with other churches
- Multi-church revival services
- Adopt school, backpack drives, teacher appreciation
- Walk dog to strike up conversations in town
- Time at coffee shop
- Partner with ministries in the community, share space
- Tract distribution

RURAL CHALLENGES

Ministry “Weeds” and Personal Challenges for Pastors

Challenges for rural congregations

- Historic wounds from the church's past mistakes
- Resource limitations
- Deep resistance to change/traditionalism/comfort
- Cultural Christianity masking a lack of real transformation
- People prioritize politics/Christian nationalism
- Division over politics/hate/suspicion
- Competing with cable news and radio talk shows
- Lack of resources to help those in need (unemployed, homeless, food, mental health, etc.)

Challenges for rural congregations *Continued*

- Divisions/factions/gossip/drama
- Inward focus
- Discouragement from small size and lack of resources
- Apathy/indifference
- Lack of engagement in Scripture
- Materialism
- Busyness/youth sports/hobbies
- Members not attending (preceded by lacking personal devotions)
- Cultivating a spirit of service
- Aging congregation

Challenges for rural pastors

- Isolation
- Role fatigue from juggling multiple responsibilities
- Treated as an outsider, since “not from here”
- Weight of carrying others’ pain
- Burnout

RESOURCES AND NEEDS

Sources of Guidance, Ministry Tools, and Training/Equipping Needs

Types of sources of guidance

Note: There was a wide variety of resources mentioned and often only mentioned by one person.

- Books
- Podcasts
- Relationships/friendships with other pastors
- Videos (online/streamed)
- Commentaries/Logos
- Seminars/workshops/trainings (especially when focused on rural or small churches)
- Social media posts from pastors to see what they are doing
- Advice from retired pastors

Essential tools for ministry

- God's Word
- Time and ways to connect with people
- Communal prayer
- Humility
- Unity (especially among leaders)/teamwork
- People caring for people
- Preparing/investing in God's people for works of service
- Weekly small group Bible studies
- My computer
- My car
- Humility

Essential tools for ministry

Things pastors are seeking in the resources they turn to

- Ideas
- Empathy
- Shape their approach to ministry
- Personal development (e.g., realizing they needed a long-term mindset in ministry)
- Help people discover their gifts or strengths
- Teaching people/helping people understand truths: Several used resources directly with their congregation, a small group, a group of elders, or a committee to help them understand truths or to spur change

Training/Equipping Needs

- Opportunities to get together with other rural pastors
- More rural hubs for training and gathering
- Toolbox/resources for training lay leaders
- Support from experienced rural ministers (zoom, personal meetings/consultations)
- Online cohorts of rural pastors
- Soul care
- Mental health counseling for pastors
- Retreats
- Practical ideas

RURAL MINISTRY

Pastors' diverse descriptions of Inherited Realities, Community Involvement, using Networks as Lifelines, and Financial Situations

Some rural communities have inherited realities that shape ministry there

Note: These are examples of challenges mentioned but do not represent all rural communities

- Towns have lost their primary industry
- Young adults migrate to cities for school and jobs
- Church has parsonage that needs repairs
- Church has parsonage, so pastor is not gaining equity for retirement
- Long drives to nearest hospitals make ministry mileage and time expensive

These are not problems to solve, but realities to live with

Inherited realities in their own words

- “Living in a parsonage for 30 plus years means I have no home equity and retirement savings so far is not sufficient.”
- “Our community has suffered the loss of a coal mine and several other businesses. The folks are older and are held here by the land.”
- “Most of our young adults are gone. However, the few we have in this age range are rock stars”
- “We have few young adults who have "stuck around." After graduating, many leave for bigger cities, college, etc.”
- “A local hospital visit is 40 miles round trip, most are 200-300+ miles round trip!”
- “Costco trip means a 3-hour boat ride (which just got more expensive) round trip.”
- “The parsonage is dilapidated. There is so many things wrong with the house, but we are not allowed to fix things without the approval of the church. And then the church is not able to fix the house adequately because they have let the maintenance of it go for so long.”
- “Maintaining a parsonage with limited access to contractors/plumbers. A uniquely rural challenge I believe.”

Community involvement varies across rural churches

- Some pastors admit their church would not be missed if they disappeared tomorrow
- Some pastors focus on the involvement of people from their church serving in their community and providing a living testimony for Christ
- Some pastors describe church programs that serve as vital community infrastructure

Community involvement in their own words

Roles the church plays that would be missed by the community if the church were gone

No role in the community

- “We have a few small things we have done, but nothing so significant that it would be noticed [if we disappeared tomorrow].”
- “I am saddened to say that we wouldn't be missed by more than the members.”
- “I think that our community would miss very little. Sadly, I think that no matter how hard we have worked we have not made a lot of movement into the foundation of our community.”

The people

- “We are the primary staff volunteers for our county's mobile food pantry. We operate a small clothing closet that gives away gently used children's clothing to families in need. Our church currently provides the only office volunteers for a pregnancy support center in our town.”
- “The people of our church are actively involved in our community as coaches, park board members, Lions club members, and school board members, and if they disappeared, I think that not only would their roles need to be filled, their attitudes and character would be missed.”
- “We are a body of Spirit filled believers & where we go in town we take the presence of Jesus with us. So, if our church no longer exists & there are no longer Spirit filled believers in the school, at the grocery store, at town council, at the fire department then evil will grow.”

Community involvement in their own words

Roles the church plays that would be missed by the community if the church were gone

The organization/programs

- “The food pantry would be missed first by more people than anything else. Sadly, many of the younger folks who have kids still living in this area are unskilled workers and need the most help with things such as food.”
- “We have the only state-licensed daycares in our county and provide affordable childcare for our community.”
- We host a community food bank twice every month. We also have a vibrant VBS that takes in children from multiple communities around us. These programs have been here for over 50 yrs, so it has established us in the community.”
- “A feeding program by our church provides supplemental food to 24% of the elementary school students, for the weekend.”
- “This town would be without a major material aid ministry: food and clothes, bill assistance, grocery/gas cards, and compassionate care for life needs would be absent. We are the only church in this community.”
- “A community preschool. (It boggles my mind that there is more church recognition from the preschool than many of the other things we do.) Two events to get county kids the things that they need for the school year from haircuts, clothes, backpacks and school supplies. Another outreach to get county kids a coat that fits as well as a pair of shoes and socks that fit.”

The building

- “The State Fairgrounds is directly across the street from the church. Right now, the parking we provide for those 10 days would be missed the most.”
- “Many organizations would lose a place to host their meeting (4H, Girl Scouts, the community blood drive).”
- “Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, and Boy Scouts all call our building home. We host a twelve-step group.”

Rural pastors find networks are not optional

- Pastors benefit from intentional relationships/friendships – some within their church and others outside
- Pastors value peer networks
- Rural pastors don't network to get ahead. They network to stay afloat
- These relationships are lifelines and life-giving

Intentional networks in their own words

Intentional relationships/friendships

- “I have made close friends with some of the members of the church.”
- “Having a leader in the church to bounce things off of... I have had good relationships with the Church President, and before every meeting we talk through the agenda and get on the same page. This has helped greatly.”
- “Spending time with friends who are not members of the church or community; who know me as their friend and not their minister.”
- “Friendships have come from pickleball, our church/district, people with similar interests and place in life, and community involvement. Intentionally reaching out and spending time together.”
- “Fellowship with my people. Aiming for multiple times a week outside of a formal church gathering.”
- “My friends are friends from previous churches that I attended. We stay in touch through texting and phone calls.”

Intentional networks in their own words

Peer networks

- “I have found I need to have friends who are not connected with the church because I can be more honest with them. Other pastors have been very supportive in this area.”
- “I meet monthly with a group of pastors in my region from my denomination (some driving from as much as 2 1/2 hours away). This is one of the most life-giving experiences I have. I don't know if I could keep pastoring without that group.”
- “I met a great colleague in the next town over that is from the same theological background. We have bonded and can share struggles. That has been the most important to me.”
- “I touch base with other pastors regularly. They know what I am going through. It is hard to find friends and confidants outside the ministry. Those on the outside may be compassionate, but don't really understand the burdens of the ministry.”
- “It is also good to be a part of a ministerial group where you can feel free to open up with struggles and don't feel like you are being judged but rather offer each other encouragement.”
- “Friends from seminary—those that may be in other parts of the country working through the same things we are here. We may not see each other often, but there is great value in those friendships.”

Church finances vary widely as do the intricacies of each situation

- Church finances reflect current realities and the decisions of previous generations
- For finances to work for the pastor's family, many supplement their church income with their spouse's income, retirement funds, or a second job
- Pastors can be creative in meeting their needs

Church & pastor finances in their own words

- "Our church is very well provided for financially. The previous pastor wisely led the church to a position with debts paid off and a healthy saving balance."
- "I think the unique challenges facing rural ministry can just be how the death or retiring of one person can really affect the tithing income."
- "We are blessed to have 2 trusts that give the church an average of a little over \$3000 a month in income on average. Without that we'd be running probably in the red."
- "Health insurance is the major issue for a lot of rural churches. It is a huge expenditure."
- "I have spent my entire career, 27+ years, serving rural churches, at my denomination's minimum salary level. I have been the last full-time pastor at four of these congregations. My wife and I have learned to live frugally."
- "Gardening has also helped my budget as well as hunting for my meat."
- "Fortunately for us several of our farming families like to clean out their freezers every now and again and we get some great meat."
- "Fortunately for me, I spent 25 years working in a major retail company before entering the ministry, so I have investments which bless me with no financial worries. One reason I am able to serve in a rural setting is because of that personal safety net."

Church & pastor finances in their own words

- “The church provides a minimum salary but also provides the parsonage with all bills paid for it.... water, electric, gas, repairs. But my wife and I are on Social Security which gets us through financially. No younger pastor could afford to come here at this time.”
- “I get paid full time salary and we live in a parsonage, but I pay all the bills. My wife works for the school so that we can have medical insurance.”
- “My family is doing well financially. A parsonage to live in rent free and with utilities paid plus my actual salary plus my wife's salary means we are just fine, especially since the cost of living here is relatively inexpensive.”
- “I work full time at the church, but I have told them in the next two or three years that we will have blown through our reserves and they won't be able to afford me.”
- “We are going to try to make some money becoming an affordable wedding venue. If we do ten weddings a year for \$3k, that should keep us going for a while. It is stressful but we are trying.”
- “Fortunately, this congregation is financially stable, but of course, there is always the possibility of one major need that could cause a problem. For example, we had to replace the roofs of both the church and the parsonage last year.”
- “We are broke. We went from having a LOT of money but terrible health to having very little money but a healthy core. It's a much better problem in many ways than what I walked into 7 years ago. We are addressing them through three ways: partnerships, fundraisers, and grants.”