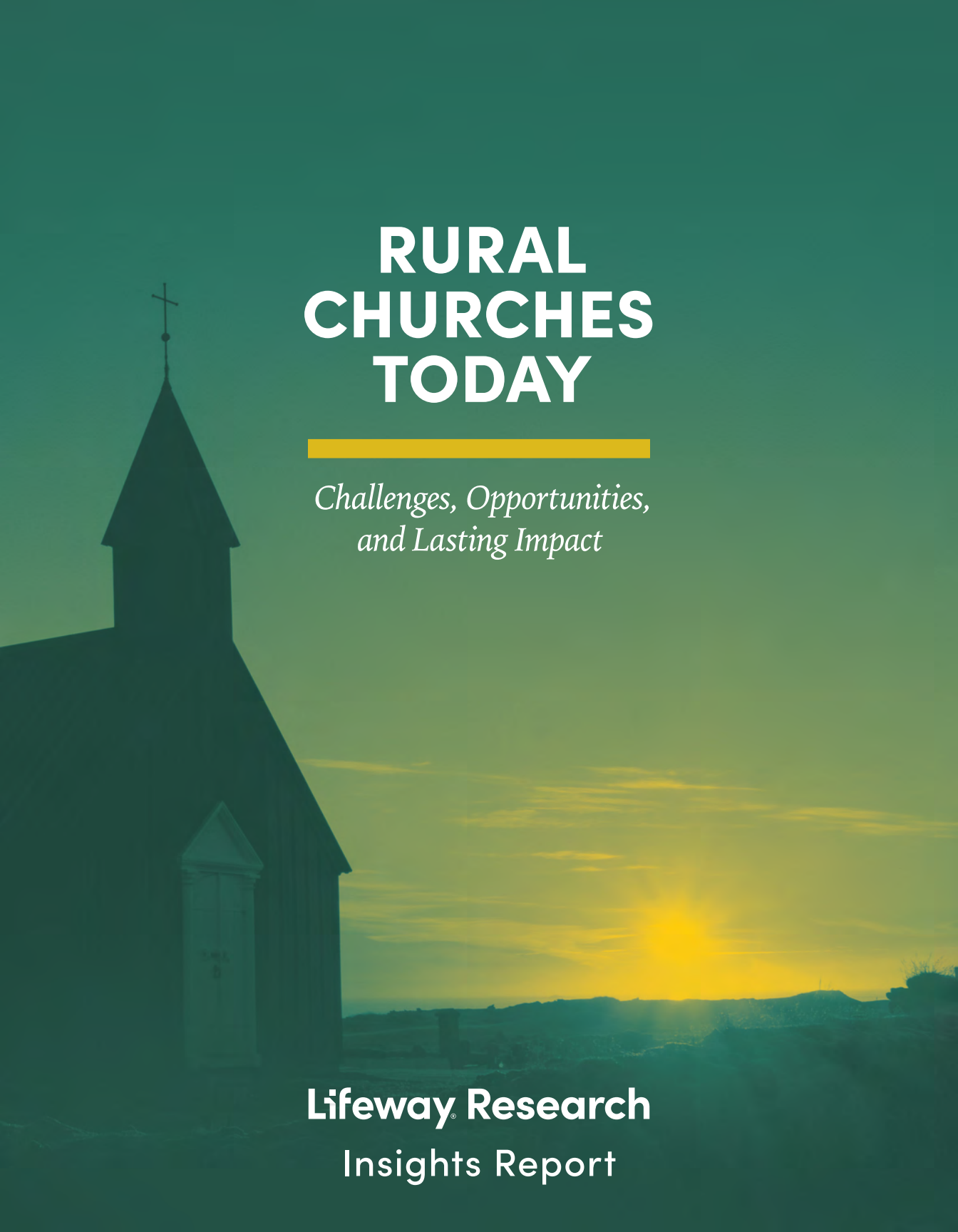


The background of the entire page is a photograph of a church steeple in silhouette on the left side. The sky is a gradient of teal and green, with a bright yellow sun setting on the horizon to the right, creating a lens flare effect. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

RURAL CHURCHES TODAY

*Challenges, Opportunities,
and Lasting Impact*

Lifeway Research
Insights Report

Rural pastors may be serving in smaller places, but the ministry they lead can have an outsized impact. While rural church pastors share many ministry delights and challenges with pastors in other contexts, certain aspects of rural church life make it unique.

Lifeway Research's [Rural Churches Today](#) study of pastors in small towns and rural areas identified unique features of ministry in those places. The Center for Rural Ministry at Grove City College, The Rural Home Missionary Association, and the Rural Church Institute at the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center sponsored the study.

While national surveys of Protestant churches include rural churches, there have previously been very few national studies that focus on rural churches. These interviews with Protestant pastors provide an overview of ministry realities while also capturing what pastors find rewarding and difficult.

This study paints a portrait of pastors who sense a calling to the church they are serving, not necessarily to a rural context. While pastors navigate the unique charms and challenges in a rural setting, they overwhelmingly report evidence of God at work in their communities—even if success isn't always measured in attendance numbers.

Over and over, the research points to the importance of relationships in rural communities, forming the foundation for both shared leadership within the church and effective evangelism in the community.

In this report, you'll find key stats and practical takeaways for ministry in rural areas. We cover everything from measuring success and identifying ministry impact to navigating ministry challenges and financial limitations. Plus, we've included practical insights to help you with challenges like leading growth and developing leaders in a rural church.

I hope this report encourages you to remain faithful as you serve your church and community. You are not alone in the ministry challenges you face, and the work you do to bring the gospel to your community each day matters.

Scott McConnell,
Executive Director of Lifeway Research

Key Findings

- » **Most rural pastors feel called to a specific church rather than a rural context.** The majority (63%) sense a calling to their particular congregation, even if they didn't initially seek rural ministry.
- » **Success is defined more by spiritual growth than numerical growth.** Pastors overwhelmingly point to care, faithfulness, and transformed lives as more important indicators of success than attendance increases.
- » **Rural pastors are highly optimistic about the future of their churches.** Nearly 9 in 10 expect their church to be stronger in 10 years, reflecting confidence rooted in faith.
- » **Evangelism in rural churches is heavily relational, not programmatic.** Most outreach happens through personal relationships, invitations, and everyday interactions, though formal events can be effective.
- » **Rural churches are consistently seeing new commitments to Christ.** While growth may be gradual, most rural churches report ongoing gospel impact within their congregations and communities.
- » **Developing and empowering lay leaders is the most common challenge.** Three in 5 pastors say leadership development is a pressing issue, highlighting the need for shared ministry responsibility.
- » **Many rural churches operate with limited resources but remain financially functional.** Despite constraints, 81% say they have enough funding to support essential ministry needs.
- » **Rural ministry offers a unique opportunity to influence the entire community.** Pastors often serve not just a congregation but the broader town, shaping everyday life through presence and relationships.



Ministry & Calling

“Everyone knows everyone, and that causes everyone to come together in times of struggle or crisis.”

—Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

Life in rural America has its charms and challenges. Those who pastor in small towns across the United States recognize the trials inherent to those areas but believe God is working in their congregations and communities.

Most rural church pastors are where they are, not specifically because it's a small town, but because their church happens to be there. Almost 2 in 3 (63%) say they feel called to ministry to their specific church that happens to be in a small town or rural area. Around a quarter (24%) feel called to rural places. Fewer say they don't sense a specific calling to ministry in that context (9%) or aren't sure if they're called in that way (5%).

What Is a Rural Church?

In his book, *[The Forgotten Church](#)*, Glenn Daman gives three markers of what encompasses rurality.

- 1. Rurality encompasses the isolation of where people live.**
- 2. Rurality encompasses the way people earn their living.**
- 3. Rurality encompasses the values people share.**

In other words, there's a shared sense of isolation, a shared economy (think of a community dependent upon something like farming or manufacturing), and a shared set of values. This isn't to say all rural communities are homogenous; not at all. But there is still some truth to the phrase "small town values."

More than 60 million people live in rural America. These folks need the gospel too. While there's a need for rural church planting, in many communities, the biggest need is for the existing churches to be healthy, gospel-preaching, disciple-multiplying churches.

Simply put, rural churches matter because rural people matter to the kingdom of God.

Rural churches are as diverse as the communities they serve. You can find some with traditional worship, singing only hymns with a piano and organ, while others will have full praise bands singing the newest worship songs.

You'll find some rural churches that have served their communities for multiple centuries and rural church plants that have only existed for a few months. Some rural churches will be struggling with just a couple dozen senior adults, while others are vibrant and exciting places with dozens of young families.

There's no one-size-fits-all definition for rural churches. But what you'll find in rural churches of all shapes and sizes are people committed to the local church and the Great Commission.

So, if you find yourself serving a rural church (however you may define it), don't lose heart. You're not serving on the B-team or the JV team of ministry. You're doing valuable and needed ministry among people who are loved and valued in the kingdom of God.

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Measuring Success

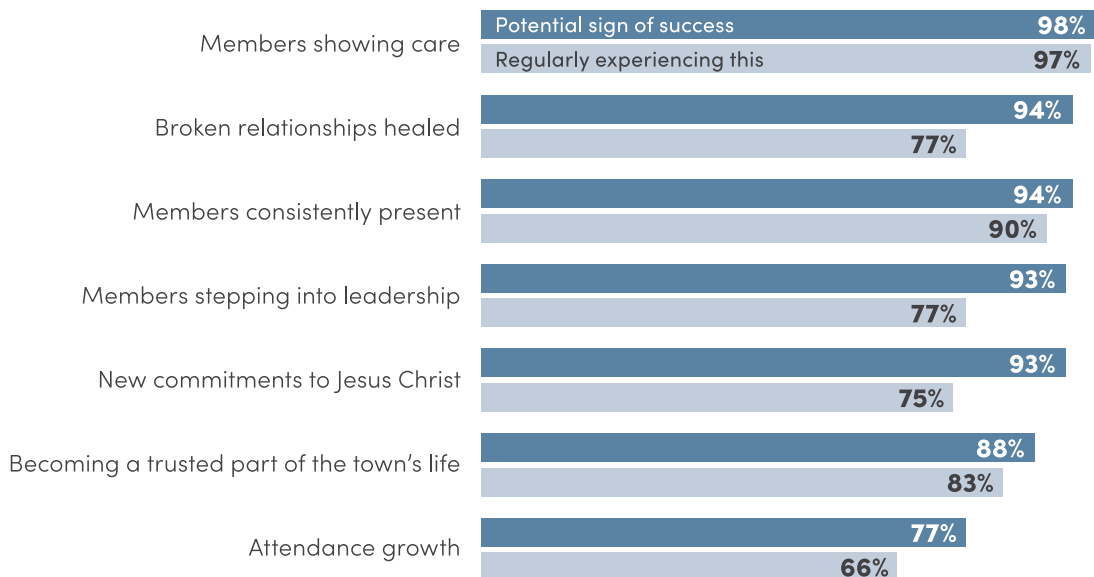
“We have seen some success with our members developing relationships with their neighbors and will be baptizing someone as a result in the near future.”

— Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

Despite others' perceptions of their ministries, pastors in rural areas see current ministry wins and are optimistic about the future.

Small-town pastors say success in their context often involves churchgoers making specific applications of their faith. More than 9 in 10 say they consider it a ministry success when they look at their church and see members showing care (98%), broken relationships healed (94%), members consistently present (94%), members stepping into leadership (93%), and new commitments to Jesus Christ (93%).

Slightly fewer also point to becoming a trusted part of the town's life (88%) and seeing attendance growth at the church (77%).



Most pastors, though perhaps not as many as would like, say they're regularly experiencing each of these potential signs of success in their churches.

Almost all (97%) say it's a regular occurrence for them to see members showing care, while 90% say they see members consistently present.

Around 4 in 5 rural pastors (83%) say they're becoming a trusted part of their town's life. Close to 3 in 4 regularly see members in their congregation stepping into leadership (77%), broken relationships healed (77%), and new commitments to Christ (75%). Two in 3 (66%) say their congregation regularly experiences attendance growth.

Since most rural communities are not growing, it's harder for churches there to increase attendance. Yet 3 in 4 pastors still aim for attendance growth. Even more rural pastors aim for success in the spiritual growth of their congregations, evidenced by their focus on salvations, care, forgiveness, and serving.

With these signs of success, it's no wonder small-town pastors are optimistic. Almost 9 in 10 (88%) expect their church to be stronger in 10 years, including 53% who strongly agree. Just 11% disagree, and 1% aren't sure.

Attendance and budget also play a role in a pastor's future expectations. Pastors at churches with fewer than 50 people in attendance are the most likely to disagree that their churches will be stronger in 10 years (24%). Those at churches with a budget of \$300,000 or more are the most likely to agree (97%).

Most rural pastors have a more positive outlook for their churches than past statistics might support. Clearly, pastors in rural areas are putting their confidence in God's capabilities rather than widespread trends.

4 Marks of Success in a Rural Church

1. Members care well for one another.

People in rural churches are uniquely positioned to care well for each other. In many cases, members of rural churches are involved in several aspects of their local communities. They see one another not just at church but also at work, the grocery store, and high school football games. This provides the opportunity for multiple interactions throughout the week.

So when a need arises, folks don't have to wait until Sunday morning or Wednesday evening to hear about it. This allows church members to respond to pressing needs more quickly.

2. The church has a deep connection to the local community.

Rural pastors and churches can become a part of the fabric of the town in a unique way that's much more difficult in larger cities. A pastor in a rural community can often become a "community" pastor. This can open opportunities for ministry well beyond the church walls—at school and community events and even at the local grocery store.

If your church doesn't already have a strong presence in the community, visit with school or civic leaders to see how you can serve them. Begin hanging out where the people of the community spend time—usually ball fields or local diners.

3. There's a pattern of steady attendance.

In many cases (certainly not all), a pattern of steady attendance in a rural congregation can be a marker of church health. This may be particularly true in a community where the overall population is in a state of decline. Many rural areas tend to have a large turnover of people—both because of those who move away and those who pass away.

So, for example, if a rural church has maintained an average worship attendance of 50 people over the last five years, that probably means the church has reached new people (particularly if the number of baptisms and those who've joined have remained steady as well).

4. There is effective discipleship and leadership development.

Like churches of any size, discipleship and leadership development are foundational to the long-term health of rural churches. That means a strategic discipleship pathway must be in place.

The next generation of pastors, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and Vacation Bible School leaders are already in many pews. They simply need discipleship. For many rural churches, the long-term survival and health of the church depend on raising up leaders from within their churches and communities.

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5 Principles for Rural Church Growth

1

Establish a loving community.

2

Maximize investments and partnerships.

3

Prioritize evangelism.

4

Don't make assumptions.

5

Disciple people on a strong foundation.

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Ministry Impact

“Any formal evangelistic efforts have failed horribly. It’s only when people ‘accidentally’ invite that we actually see evangelism happen. It’s parents sharing stories about VBS and neighbors inviting new neighbors to soup supper that actually works.”

— Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

In the past 12 months, the median rural congregation has seen five new commitments to Jesus Christ as Savior through their church. A few churches (13%) have not seen any new decisions recently. A third (33%) have seen from one to four commitments in the past year, while another third (32%) reports from five to 10. Less than a quarter (22%) say more than 10 people have made a new commitment to Jesus in the past 12 months at their church, including 10% who said 21 or more.

How many new commitments to Christ do rural churches see in a year?

22%

had more than 10 new commitments to Christ in the past 12 months

31%

had more than 10 new commitments to Christ per 100 attendees in the past 12 months

Evaluating based on new commitments per 100 attendees presents another data point that may better represent the effectiveness of a congregation. One in 4 churches (27%) had more than zero but up to five new responses. Around 3 in 10 (29%) saw more than five and up to 10 commitments. Another 3 in 10 (31%) say more than 10 people per 100 attendees at their church made a new decision.

The new commitment numbers among small-town churches are slightly lower than the average U.S. Protestant church, according to a [2024 Lifeway Research study](#). Among all Protestant churches, 38% have seen at least 10 new commitments to Jesus per 100 attendees in the past 12 months.

Change can happen more slowly in rural areas, but rural churches continue to be dedicated to reaching people in their communities with the gospel in hopes of lives being changed. New commitments to Jesus Christ reported by rural churches include both children of church members and people in the community who had not previously professed faith in Christ.

Rural pastors say their churches are using several outreach activities to share the gospel with their communities. More than 4 in 5 say in the last year their church has had members inviting people to church (92%), members sharing the gospel in conversations (84%), and members serving people with food distribution, toy giveaways, or helping in schools (81%).

Around 3 in 4 say their church conducted kids events such as an Easter egg hunt, fall festival, or VBS (77%) and tried using social media or online ads (73%). Two in 3 (64%) tried conducting community events like cookouts, parenting classes, or craft fairs. More than 2 in 5 (42%) conducted evangelism training. While 3% say another activity, fewer than 1% say they have not been able to do any of these recently.

As far as which ones are most effective, pastors are most likely to say conducting kids events (26%), church members inviting people (24%), and serving people with food distribution, toy giveaways, or helping in schools (20%) have had the greatest evangelistic impact on their communities.

Personally, small-town pastors say they're most likely to see evangelistic results from individual relationships. They say their greatest evangelistic impact comes from spending time one-on-one listening to people (23%), being present in people's lives (17%), and building friendships over meals and activities together (17%). Pastors also point to preaching evangelistic sermons (16%), serving individuals by meeting practical needs (13%), and sharing seeds of truth that may emerge later (12%).

Rural pastors also believe personal touch matters among their congregations, not just for reaching their communities. Around 9 in 10 (89%) believe being present in people's lives is more effective ministry than having good church programs, including 55% who strongly agree, while only 10% disagree, and 2% are not sure.

2 Leadership Mistakes Every Rural Church Pastor Must Avoid

1. Don't prioritize programs over people.

It's not that programs aren't important in the rural church. If a church cares about Bible study or ministering to kids, it needs to have some kind of program in place or discipleship likely won't happen. But the relational nature of the small church means these ministries will be viewed through a relational lens.

2. Don't lead primarily through your pastoral position.

When you try to force change through the authority of your position, one of two things often happens. Either the church members nod in agreement without meaning it, leaving you confused when no one is willing to pick up the donuts for Sunday morning. Or you experience pushback.

In both cases, you're running up against the relational nature of the rural church. You may have the authority to suggest these changes as pastor—and there's a good chance they, indeed, need to change—but making a change that impacts the people of the church without getting their input and buy-in is an easy way to create unrest.

To avoid unnecessary struggle in your rural church, lead through people instead of your position as pastor. Make sure you know your church and everyone in it. Become a member of the church and not just the pastor of the church. Through that relational network, you can begin to have conversations about changes.

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4 Realities of Rural Church Ministry

1. Other institutions will be scarce and are facing their own challenges.

Few rural communities provide all the health, food, and educational facilities found in a typical city. Rural hospitals are closing. Dollar stores can sell enough calories to keep someone alive, but it isn't going to provide the full grocery services people need to thrive. Only the town 45 minutes away has that. Schools are facing budget deficits, shrinking, and closing. In many rural communities, schools are one of the last two anchor institutions—the other being the church. So, when community institutions either never existed, have shut down, or are “consolidated,” pastors have to get creative.

2. Church is optional.

Secularization has reached rural areas just as much as urban ones. Accepting this reality may help pastors drop a mindset that people in the community will find their own way to the church, like they supposedly did in “the olden days.” Pastors can help the congregation develop habits of extending invitations and having conversations around why regular church attendance is one of the joys of the Christian life.

3. Young adults may be few.

A related item to the above realities is the widely reported out-migration of young adults from rural areas. With fewer services and amenities, opportunity can look limited in many rural areas. For many young people, those years after high school often result in them going out from a place that was home. That change is permanent for some, but only for a time for others. Give those who grow up in the community and leave a reason to return.

4. Pastors don't necessarily feel called to rural ministry specifically.

The reality is rural churches aren't likely to call pastors who are consciously preparing for the other realities discussed above. But pastors know they're called to particular churches, wherever they're located, and most come wanting to learn. Be patient; give yourself time to build relationships and learn the local culture.

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Navigating Challenges

“I find that a church in which dedicated volunteers do the work of the church is much healthier than a church that hires people to do the work of the church.”

—Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

Despite any optimism rural pastors have about the future or current success they’re seeing, they still recognize real issues that confront their ministries and congregations. Three in 5 (60%) say their church is currently challenged by developing and empowering lay leaders. Lifeway Research’s [2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study](#) found developing leaders and volunteers to be the top need for all U.S. Protestant pastors.

Half of small-town pastors (50%) say their church is struggling with resistance to change right now. Slightly fewer point to people being Christian in name but lacking real transformation (44%) and financial limitations (44%). Around a third (36%) say their congregation is inwardly focused. Around a quarter are facing relational difficulties among people in the congregation (27%) or distrust in the community due to past church mistakes (25%). One in 5 rural pastors (21%) say politics is creating division or given too much importance. Only 7% say none of these are an issue in their church.

The focus of rural pastors is on the spiritual growth of the individuals in their congregations. Pastors celebrate when they see their congregations showing the impact of Jesus Christ, and they lament when there is less spiritual movement and engagement.

As many rural pastors say developing leaders is one of their challenges, 65% say they spend time each month developing lay leaders' skills and experience. Still, most (53%) say they often feel like the congregation looks to them to do most of the church's work.

But pastors agree they have someone else in the church who leads or helps significantly with many ministry areas, including caring for the needs of church members (87%), serving ministries in the community (83%), women's ministry (82%), kids ministry (80%), adult small group Bible studies (72%), teen ministry (63%), and evangelism (61%). Just 1% of small church pastors say they don't have someone helping in a significant way in any of these areas.

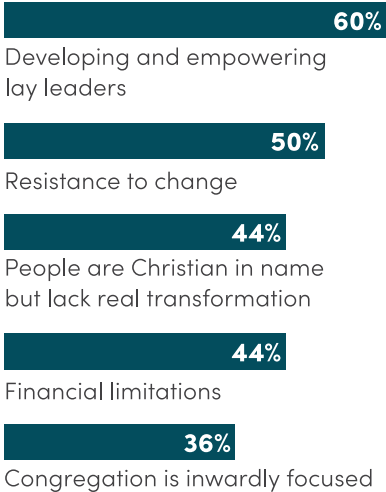
While 99% of rural pastors describe lay people in their church with ministry responsibilities, it doesn't mean they have enough leaders. Of the seven ministries listed, the average church has lay leaders helping lead five of them. Either the pastor has to cover the other two or the congregation lacks that ministry at their church.

Beyond their congregational challenges, rural pastors say they face their own personal struggles within the ministry. Almost half (47%) say they are currently dealing with the weight of carrying other people's pain. Around 2 in 5 are facing difficulty disengaging from work and ministry to relax and have fun (43%), exhaustion from over-commitment or overwork (40%), difficulty taking one day each week to get away from ministerial work and rest (39%), and feeling ineffective (38%). A quarter currently struggles with burnout (26%) and loneliness (26%). One in 5 (19%) say they aren't facing any of these.

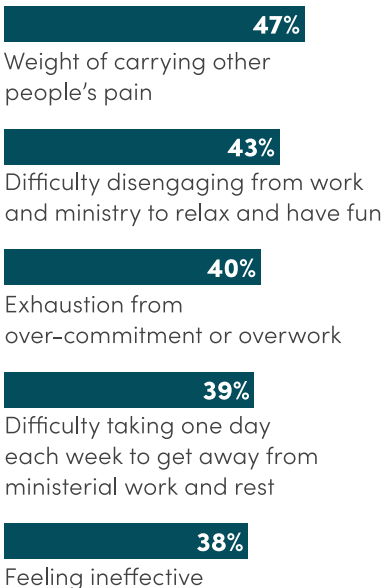
With these challenges, 99% of pastors say they currently invest in meaningful friendships with at least one other possible relationship. Around 9 in 10 point to one or more adults in their church (92%), another pastor (88%), and one or more adults who live outside their community (87%). Slightly more than 4 in 5 say they have close friends who are unbelievers in their community (83%) and a believer in their community who is not in their church (82%).

Rural areas offer unique challenges to congregations and pastors

Which are currently challenges for the congregation?



Which are currently challenges for the pastor?



5 Considerations for Developing Leaders in a Rural Church

1. Partner with lay leaders in the church.

While pastors of smaller churches feel more responsibility is placed on them, a lay leader in a smaller church is also likely to be involved in multiple church ministries, risking burnout for both lay leader and pastor.

What are healthy ways for pastors and congregations to work together to build the kingdom of God in their communities? How can they recognize the particular resources available to them and the specific calling of God on their church's ministry?

2. Stay attentive and focused.

Any rural church paying attention to its community will see many potential needs. We then face two temptations: a feeling that we need to address them all or despair that we can't. Both responses can be rooted in deep care for the community.

Where are people in the congregation already showing love for their community? Who's the volunteer mechanic, the first to offer a meal to a family with a new baby, or the tax advisor?

Talking to members about their leadership in other areas of the community opens opportunities to frame those areas as kingdom work for the whole congregation. With permission, telling a story from the pulpit of a congregant's leadership in loving the community can inspire others to do the same.

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3. Make the ask.

Build the ministry team by paying attention to the congregation and personally reaching out to potential volunteers. Sure, sometimes you'll hear no. But be proactive.

Recognize those in the congregation who are already committed in some ways and could grow by exercising their faith in new ways. Everyone wants volunteers, but sometimes the direct ask is the needed catalyst.

4. Younger isn't necessarily better.

One of the most prominent demographics in rural churches is its best asset: retirees in early old age. Whether the retiree is a lifelong church leader or recent convert, this leader holds a powerful mix of wisdom, resources, time, and energy.

Yes, they can help visit the elderly shut-ins of a congregation, but we shouldn't assume people in their 60s and 70s can't relate to children, youth, young professionals, and families.

5. Create partners.

One church isn't called to do it all. A potential leader in the church might be great interpersonally but less skilled in administering a ministry. Community partners help round out a full team with good resources.

A spirit of cooperation can help reduce fears of scarcity and help a church position leaders in networks of support with lower barriers of entry to leadership.

Meaningful Friendships in Rural Ministry

Rural communities are inherently relational, and that culture naturally pulls pastors into meaningful connections with other people. In many ways, rural pastors become part of the community's social fabric simply by being present. And when they invest intentionally, they often find those efforts warmly reciprocated, resulting in friendships that offer genuine social fulfillment and lasting support.

Rural communities are typically built around generational ties to the land and extended family networks. These deep roots shape a culture that instinctively values relationships over efficiency, personality over professionalism, and informal interactions over formal processes.

People in rural places have shared a great deal of life together—school, work, sports, church, harvest seasons, and community events. Over time, these overlapping experiences create a kind of relational fluency.

Folks know one another's histories, strengths, and quirks, and they've learned how to navigate those dynamics in ways that are both practical and deeply personal. The result is a community where connection isn't just appreciated but essential.

Relationships in rural communities are also multilayered. Your auto mechanic might be your former high school teammate, your neighbor's cousin, and your sister's ex-boyfriend.

These overlapping roles create a dense web of social intimacy. While it can be difficult for newcomers to break into a community like this, those who do often discover immense relational treasures. Friendships here tend to be thick, loyal, and long lasting.

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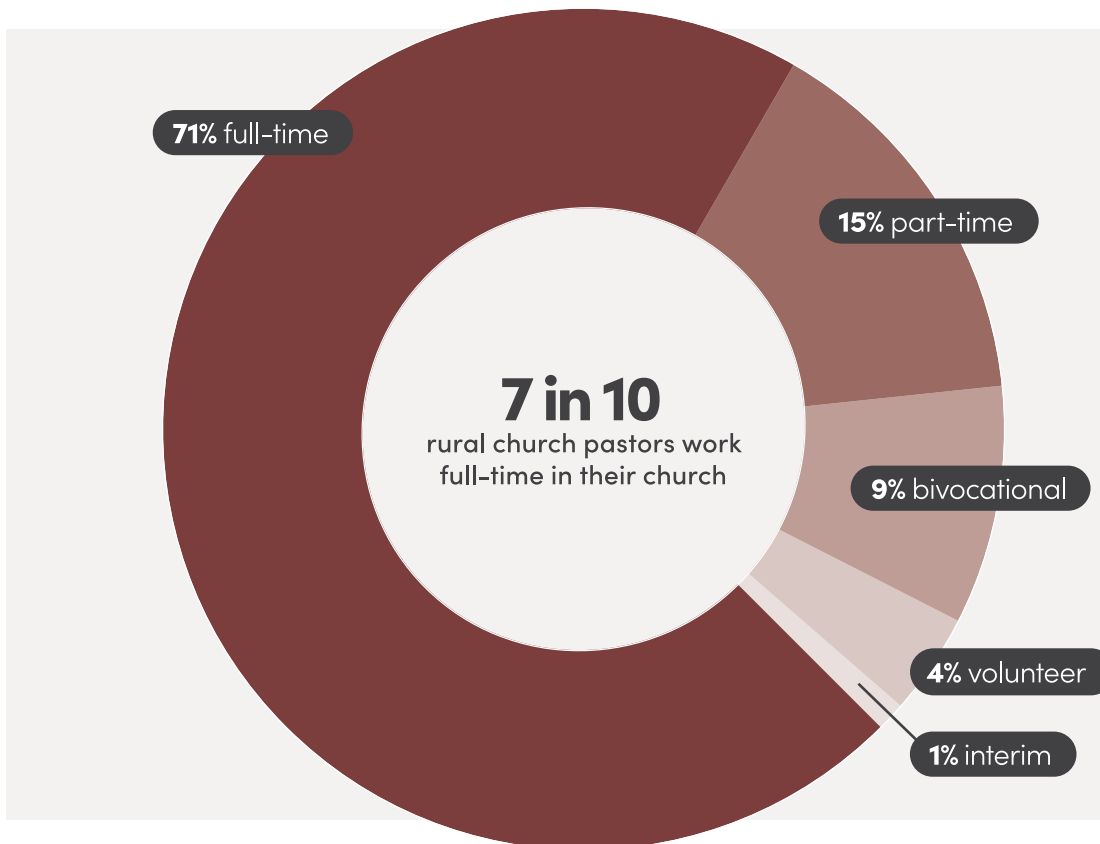
Financial Limitations

"I think a unique challenge in rural ministry can be how the death or retirement of one person can really affect the tithing income."

—Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

Despite 44% of rural pastors saying their church is being challenged by financial limitations, 4 in 5 (81%) say their congregation has the financial resources to support essential ministry, including 50% who strongly agree.

As these churches prepare their budgets, most pay their pastor to serve full-time. Around 7 in 10 (71%) small-town pastors say they work full-time and earn their only income from their church.



Still, some are serving in non-full-time roles. Almost 1 in 7 (15%) are part-time and only earn income from the church. One in 10 (9%) are bivocational. Fewer say they are a volunteer (4%) and earn no income from the church or interim (1%), temporarily serving until a new pastor is named.

Among those pastors who serve bivocationally or as volunteers, most work more than 20 hours in their other job. More than a quarter each say they work more than 40 hours (27%) and between 20–39 hours (27%). Fewer say they work less than 20 hours (20%), while 26% don't work an outside job.

The predominant source of income for the families of rural pastors is the payment from the church. Nine in 10 (90%) say their family gets at least part of their income from compensation from their role at the church. Half (50%) have income from their spouses' jobs. A third have money coming in from pension or retirement funds (33%). A quarter (26%) have income from a job or work outside the church. Few (4%) get money from funds raised from donors, while 1% say none of these.

The attendance and budget of many rural churches would not suggest they could support a full-time pastor. Yet we see 7 in 10 rural churches making it work. This number likely would not be possible without spouses also working and 27% being at or near retirement age (age 65 and older).

5 Benefits to Bivocational Ministry

1. Bivocational pastors have greater access to the unchurched.

A bivocational pastor will naturally have relationships with non-Christian coworkers and customers. This access to the unchurched creates more opportunities for the pastor to reach and disciple individuals who wouldn't typically attend a church service.

2. Bivocational pastors model work as worship.

Scripture doesn't make such distinctions between "sacred" and "secular" lives. Believers are citizens of God's kingdom. As such, everything they do is kingdom work and an opportunity for worship.

This presents a great opportunity for the bivocational pastor to practice work as a means of worship and to model workplace missions.

3. Bivocational pastors encourage greater congregational involvement.

When the pastor has a limited amount of time to devote to church ministry, it creates opportunities for the congregation to use their gifts to serve the church and community.

4. More money goes to missions and ministry.

In many average-sized churches that employ a full-time pastor, personnel expenses can creep up to 75–80% of the budget. That means fewer funds are going toward ministry and missions.

If that same church decides to employ a bivocational pastor, they have greater margin in the budget to invest in growing the church through evangelism, outreach, and discipleship.

This ultimately allows the church to invest more resources in the mission of the Great Commission.

5. A bivocational model prepares churches for declines in resources.

Declines in giving could impact a church's ability to afford full-time staff. A pastor and church who strategically choose a bivocational model will be prepared for possible declines in available resources.

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Ministry Inspiration

“In a rural setting, trust is built through relationships in the community. Showing up for events in the community shows I care about what is happening outside of my congregation.”

—Pastor, Rural Churches Today study

Pastors in more rural areas say many things inspire them to serve in what some consider out-of-the-way places. Many of their inspirations are common across pastors in other areas, but some are unique to or more likely in small-town communities.

Nine in 10 rural pastors say they're inspired to pastor in this context by seeing someone take a step toward Jesus (95%), seeing the potential to make a difference (92%), getting to preach God's Word (92%), establishing long-term relationships (91%), and serving in their local community (91%).

Four in 5 say small-town church ministry inspires them because they are present for everyday activities in their community (81%) and they enjoy the pace of rural life (80%). Only 1% said none of these inspired them to pastor in a rural or small town.

The role of being a pastor is not easy, and pastoring in a rural setting also has its challenges. But rural pastors find great delight in this work. Pastors enjoy the role they get to play in their churches and communities but also are inspired by what God does in individuals' lives.

3 Reasons to Stay in Your Rural Church

Let's start off with a reason you shouldn't stay: because you feel like you have to.

In such a situation, you're likely to burn out or wash out, both of which will actually leave the church worse off because you stayed.

So, if not out of obligation, why stay? Here are three reasons:

1. Stay because you love the people.

For pastors with a deep heart to love and care for God's people, there's no better place to serve than the rural church. One of the unique blessings of serving in the rural church is the relationship you have with the varied people in your church.

2. Stay because of the community.

As a rural minister, you're not just a pastor of a church; you're a pastor of a community. I've heard plenty of people talk about the millions we can reach by serving at a large church in the city. And while that may be true, rural ministry provides a unique sphere of influence.

3. Stay because your community needs Jesus.

Underlying both of these reasons to stay in your rural church is the basic truth that the people in your community need Jesus. Rural communities are full of broken, hurting people in need of the hope that comes through a personal relationship with Jesus.

Stay, because when you look at your community, you, like Christ, are filled with empathy.

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The Bottom Line on Rural Churches Today

Rural church ministry is significant work marked by unique opportunities and real challenges. Pastors in small towns consistently demonstrate a strong sense of calling, often tied more to their specific congregation than to a geographic preference, and they overwhelmingly believe God is actively at work in their communities.

The data makes clear that success in rural churches shouldn't be primarily measured by attendance growth but by transformed lives. Pastors point to members showing care, restored relationships, consistent participation, leadership development, and new commitments to Christ as indicators of church health in rural communities. Even when numerical growth is slow—at times due to declining or plateaued populations—these churches are making meaningful spiritual impact and remain optimistic about the future.

At the same time, pastors must navigate significant challenges, including limited resources, resistance to change, and the ongoing need to develop and empower lay leaders. These realities reinforce a central takeaway: Thriving rural ministry depends on shared leadership and relational investment, not pastoral effort alone.

In rural contexts, relationships are the primary pathway for ministry. Evangelistic fruit most often comes through personal connections, presence in the community, and everyday interactions rather than formal programs. This relational emphasis shapes everything from outreach strategies to leadership development and should guide how pastors prioritize their time and energy.

Ultimately, rural pastors should be encouraged. Their work matters eternally because the people they serve matter to God. Healthy, rural churches aren't built on scale or speed but on faithful presence, intentional discipleship, and deep community roots. Investing in people, raising up leaders from within, and staying committed to the long-term work of gospel ministry will bear lasting fruit—even when it unfolds slowly.

 Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations for navigating ministry at LifewayResearch.com/RuralChurches.

About the research

The survey was sponsored by the Center for Rural Ministry at Grove City College, The Rural Home Missionary Association, and the Rural Church Institute at the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center with funding provided by the Lilly Endowment. The phone survey of 1,003 Protestant pastors was conducted Aug. 5-27, 2025.

Rural areas were defined by zip codes with RUCA (Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes) codes 7-10 that designate rural areas and small towns under 10,000 people. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches in rural areas. Quotas were used for church size. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister, or priest at the church. Responses were weighted by region and church size to more accurately reflect the population. The completed sample is 1,003 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.3%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

About Lifeway Research

Lifeway Research is a Middle Tennessee-based, evangelical research firm that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. Our work has been covered by national and international media, (Religion News Service, *Christianity Today*, NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and many others) and translated into multiple languages.

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