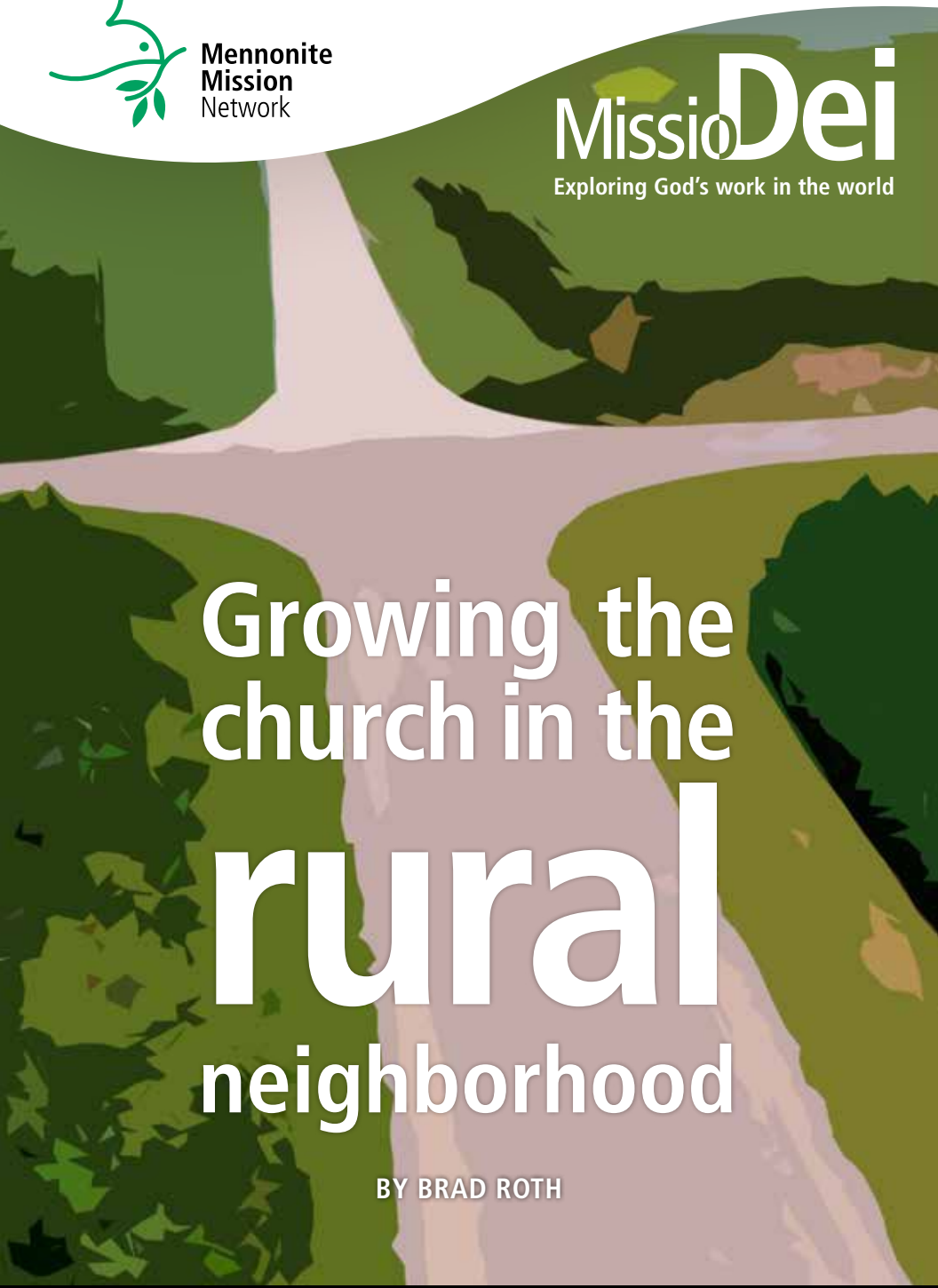
Mennonite Mission Network

Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world



Growing the church in the rural neighborhood

BY BRAD ROTH

Missio Dei #25

James R. Krabill, series editor

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Mennonite Mission Network is committed as an agency to providing relevant resources for the church. *Missio Dei* is such a resource, inviting reflection and conversation about God's mission in 21st-century contexts. It is offered free of charge to more than 1,500 pastors and lay leader subscribers. Donations are welcomed to cover costs for additional copies.

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Growing the church in the rural neighborhood

By Brad Roth

> *You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks you about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and respectful way.*
>
> —1 Peter 3:15-16a NLT

Can the rural church grow?[1] In a lot of ways, the question is not can it grow, but where is it growing? Rural congregations *are* growing in many communities. This may come as a surprise, since the dominant narrative is of rural decline. Farms got big and populations got small, we explain. The kids moved to the suburbs. Thus, our churches are empty. Blame it on the 12-row combine.

Busting the myth of population decline

The decline of the rural population is an old concern. One Missouri farmer who responded to a survey put out by Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, the results of which were reported to Congress in 1909, wrote that it was hard to find enough help on the farm. Although he and his wife had 11 living children, when asked if the "supply of farm

[1] The reflections in this booklet are taken and adapted from chapter 6, "Grow: Weirding the Axes," in my book, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2017).

labor in your neighborhood [is] satisfactory," the farmer responded, "No, because the people have gone out of the baby business."[2]

But the reality is that rural population shifts have been uneven, and while some communities have experienced decline or plateau, others have held their own or even grown. Conference and congregational leaders have long employed a narrative of rural decline due to mechanized agriculture as a shorthand for explaining why congregations have bottomed out. However, looking at the data, we can see that it is simply not the case that most of our rural communities have declined. On the contrary, they've grown. Our alibi won't hold.

It is simply not the case that most of our rural communities have declined. On the contrary, they've grown.

For example, population data for some communities that are heavily Mennonite shows steady growth in the century between 1910 and 2010.[3] My own Moundridge community grew from 626 to 1,737 during that period. Hesston, Kansas—home to Hesston College and multiple thriving industries—grew a striking 605 percent, graduating along the way from the "rural" designation to the U.S. Census' "urban cluster" category.

A similar story plays out in other Mennonite heartlands. Mountain Lake, Minnesota: 95 percent growth. Henderson, Nebraska: 154 percent growth. Kalona, Iowa: 407 percent growth. Arthur, Illinois: 88 percent growth. Shipshewana, Indiana: 165 percent growth.

Yet despite this impressive population growth, many long-standing congregations in the heartlands, Mennonite and others, have disappeared or experienced a steep drop in membership. Thus, brute population decline will not account for the fall in attendance in rural churches. Many counties and communities that have held steady population-wise have declined congregation-wise. Clearly, whatever is happening in rural churches is more complicated than simply church population tracking community population.

What do we make of this? Apart from making rural congregations feel even more guilty about being on the wrong end of the population slope, the facts compel us to complicate our story. Something is going on that can't be explained by sheer population trends.

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[2] *Report of the Country Life Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 10.

[3] Gleaned from the U.S. Census via Wikipedia.

Growth is possible in rural congregations. Taking our cue from the apostle's advice in 1 Peter 3:15-16, we can begin to rethink how we measure success in the rural church, and reclaim the ancient Christian practices of relating and listening people into the kingdom. Along the way, we'll discover that the growth of the church is ultimately rooted in our own growth in Christ-like authenticity.

Population growth of select rural communities, 1910–2010

Community	1910	2010	Percent growth
Arthur, Illinois	1,080	2,028	88%
Shipshewana, Indiana (1920)	248	658	165%
Kalona, Iowa	466	2,363	407%
Goessel, Kansas (1960)	327	539	65%
Buhler, Kansas (1920)	486	1,327	173%
Moundridge, Kansas	626	1,737	177%
Hillsboro, Kansas	1,134	2,993	164%
Hesston, Kansas (1930)	526	3,709	605%
Meade, Kansas	664	1,721	159%
Mountain Lake, Minnesota	1,081	2,104	95%
Henderson, Nebraska	391	994	154%
Freeman, South Dakota	615	1,306	112%

Source: US. Census via Wikipedia

It's time to get "weird:" finding a new way to measure growth

We need to complicate our understanding of growth and what it takes to achieve growth in rural congregations. We need new metrics to measure our work. It's time to get weird.

The word "weird" describes things that don't jibe with the norm—people and situations that are a little off-kilter. Weird is a blizzard in May, or adding tomatoes to the fruit salad, or putting pickles on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. That's weird. Weird is anything that strays from our definition of normal.

But the word *weird* actually comes from an ancient Germanic word, and before it came to mean "uncanny or strange," weird meant "turn or bend." "Weirding" is changing the direction of something from the expected line. On that definition, bending a fence or metal rod or tree trunk makes it weird. The object strays from the usual form.

I think it's time we got a little weird with how we measure growth in the rural church. We need to bend away from the usual graphs, away from growth-over-time plotted out along axis A and axis B. We need new *axes*, the plural of axis: weirded axes, axes that bend, curve, and stretch our graph and measure success in our churches by more than merely how full the sanctuary is. In fact, if we use the word *success* at all, we'll need to redefine it.

In fact, if we use the word *success* at all, we'll need to redefine it.

This may be the first thing we should take to heart about rural congregations—success should be measured along a multi-axis scale, one that takes into account all the ways that congregations faithfully love God and neighbor and inhabit their communities. Pastor and author Tim Suttle puts it this way in his book, *Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture*, when he writes: "Success is the kind of metric we simply don't know how to handle. It's above our pay grade."[4]

Inevitably, whenever we talk about success, we come back to numbers. We scan the sanctuary for new faces, and our hearts sink if it's the same old, same old. Just the usuals. We end up nodding to what Eugene Peterson calls "King Number." In his book, *Christ Plays in*

[4] Tim Suttle, *Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 41.

Photo by James R. Krabill

Ten Thousand Places, Peterson writes: "How has it come to pass that after 20 centuries of rejection, North American Christians assume that acclaim by numbers is a certificate of divine approval? The significance of the church has never been in King Number."[5]

But what if we began to plot what God is doing among us along the axis of prayer, the axis of cruciformity, the axis of love of God and neighbor, the axis of neighborly abiding? How might those axes change our assessment of rural congregations? We'll have to learn to look for the ways that our congregations are growing in goodness and beauty, faithfulness and hope. Are we becoming more Christ-like? These might be our new metrics for growth.

Yet what I'm suggesting is more than simply looking for refined growth metrics. Weirding the axes gets at a deeper question. We're challenging whether the fundamental reality of the church can be measured in the usual ways—by counting heads and checking the bottom line of the budget. The question is this: What is the norm?

Somewhere along the line, we began to use the world's axes to measure the church's growth. We've gone about it all wrong. The ways we've measured growth in the past have missed the mark. You see, the old metrics are the problem. They're actually what's weird. Our efforts to redefine how growth is measured is simply getting us back to the true norm found in Christ.

And yet, while I'm convinced that we need fresh metrics for measuring the growth of our rural congregations, I also believe we need to get serious about merely not baptizing our current no-growth malaise and calling it good. I'm convinced we can do better.

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[5] Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 288.

Spending all you have without getting better

Our problem is not demographic, so neither is our solution. We do not need to pine for a nostalgic vision of the past when the countryside was filled with farm families who had bushels of children. Remember when? They all went to church, every time the doors were open.

Like most churches in our rapidly de-Christianizing age, rural congregations have suffered. We perform more funerals than baptisms. The anxiety of decline has given birth to a cottage industry of turnaround resources, books, conferences, and techniques meant to stem the tide and re-energize the base. It's a whole lot of strategy.

Not all of it's bad. But the products of the turnaround-industrial complex have one thing in common: the belief that we can do something about our situation if only we would hone our strategy. Unfortunately, strategy won't get us where we need to go.

The challenges to growth that face the rural church cannot be fixed by simply importing church growth strategies from the suburbs. Like the woman in the Gospels who had suffered hemorrhages for 12 years, the rural church has "endured much under many physicians, and has spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse" (Mark 5:26).

The challenges to growth that face the rural church cannot be fixed by simply importing church growth strategies from the suburbs.

Indeed, much that afflicts the rural church is bigger and more intractable than what we can fix through strategy. I interviewed some dozen pastors of thriving rural congregations for this booklet, and one recurring response to my questions about what strategies they had applied for turnaround—their "secret sauce" for growth—was silence. They didn't really do anything. There was no strategy. It just happened.

Of course, church growth doesn't just happen. At the risk of sounding glibly pious: God does it. God blows through congregations and stirs up people and sends them out. God taps new lives, and loves them right into the body. That's God's mission, and the realities of God's mission are bigger than strategy. They are realities that can only be touched by the Spirit and by prayer. "I've got no church revitalization stories that don't start with prayer," said Brad Thie, director of the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative at the Duke Divinity School, when I asked him about growth among rural congregations. "I've got

Photo by Brad Roth

none. Zero. There comes a time when churches reach the end of the rope, and they just say, 'God, we need you.'"

Among the pastors I interviewed, there was another commonality. In all their congregations, they sought to get back to basics, which is to say, Jesus. They made Jesus the center of their lives and teaching. They lived the gospel and shared the gospel.

Obviously, living and sharing the gospel is a kind of strategy. It is doing something. But like prayer, this is the "strategy of strategies." Or maybe it is an anti-strategy. Either way, it is intentional Christian living in the way of Jesus—nothing more, nothing less. It is adaptable to any situation or cultural context. You don't buy it in a boxed set. In the storehouses of the church, we already have the tools we need. It's a matter of bringing out the treasure, as any good steward does, "what is old and what is new" (Matthew 13:52).

Like the woman whose fingertips brushed the soft threads of Jesus' power, our rural congregations—hemorrhaging people, especially the young, for years—have been wounded by our constant seeking after doctors. They have poked us and prodded us and made us drink nasty radioactive liquid chalk for their scans, telling us that if we would just believe the right things, pay to attend the right conferences, and buy their books in bulk, we would be well. We would grow. But so many of their prescriptions have ended up being little more than leeches and bloodletting. Many rural congregations have been left in the

lurch, feeling guilty that they haven't been able to grow like that new church in the suburbs.

So many churches have entered a profound malaise. They've tried it all and nothing has worked. Pastors, too. They come juiced up on church growth theory spiked with elements of liberation theology, and find that congregations are not infinitely malleable. The new wine bursts the old wineskin. And the pastor moves on, claiming as we all do that the congregation didn't really want to grow. Out of this wreckage, so many congregations, pastors and lay leaders have come upon a hunger and a searching for a way forward.

What's more, so much that is touted as growth strategy, in fact amounts to taking folks whose faith has been lovingly handcrafted in one congregation and transferring them to another, this time with a smoke machine and bass thump. It's the phenomenon of planting new churches in already highly churched small towns, and declaring that no one was really doing church until we showed up. The existing churches weren't relevant. It's exploiting the fissures and discontents present in every congregation to carve out a new church. It's fomenting a consumeristic mentality that appeals to our desire for the new and comfortable over the ancient and vulnerable. This may be good marketing technique, but it is shabby treatment of the bride of Christ.

Sacrificing success on the threshing floor

Looking for bright spots in the rural church, I contacted conference, denominational and parachurch leaders. I wanted to know about congregations that had found ways to grow and thrive, however they defined growth and thriving in their context, and despite the challenges faced by many rural congregations and communities. I corresponded with pastors by phone and e-mail, asking them to tell their story and share what they'd learned along the way.

One consistent factor among pastors of thriving rural congregations was their hesitance to define success solely by numbers. They named congregational engagement in the life of the church throughout the week, work with local and international relief efforts, connections between members throughout the week, and other metrics that pointed beyond the numbers on Sunday morning. One pastor, James Ralph at the Ark Bible Chapel in Pennsylvania, spoke of measuring growth around a set of eight qualities, among them "opportunities to

Photo by Brad Roth

be involved with one another beyond Sunday morning."[6] Margaret Ewen Peters, who together with her husband serves two congregations in rural Saskatchewan (Canada), described a shift from the language of numbers growth to faithfulness. Another pastor preferred to speak of "health" rather than "growth."

We would do well to remember what happened to King David when he relied on strength of numbers in 2 Samuel 24. In an effort to quantify the military power available to him, David sent Joab and the commanders of his armies to take a census of the Israelites. For nine months and 20 days, they passed through the land, counting men of fighting age. But when the commanders made their report, David was convicted by what he had done. Rather than rely on the King of the universe, he had trusted in King Number. At the end of the story, David had to sacrifice his ambitious counting on a hastily constructed altar on the threshing floor of Araunah (or Ornan in Chronicles), the Jebusite. In the books of Samuel and Kings, this is the last of David's acts. Where the first book of Samuel begins with a warning to Israel against desiring a king, the second book ends with David's repentant sacrifice for doing what kings do—measuring the success of their rule by numbers.

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[6] Pastor Ralph drew on the book by Christian Schwartz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Churchsmart Resources, 1996).

There's more. David decides to locate the temple of God at the altar on Araunah's threshing floor (1 Chronicles 22:1; 2 Chronicles 3:1). In a very real way, the temple, which would become the center of Israel's worship, is a monument to resisting the narrative of success-by-counting. It's a monument to counting on God. The temple of Israel is a visible reminder that our success does not rely on numbers and that, in fact, it can be dangerous for leaders of God's people to hang their hopes, self-worth, and the worth of their ministry on numbers.

In the church, much of what is most vital—particularly the way of the cross and costly love of God and neighbor—does not conform to the ideals of the American narrative. Like King David, we may need to sacrifice our false vision of success on the threshing floor.

Jesus anticipates our confusion when he asks, "How do you benefit if you gain the whole world, but lose your own soul in the process? Is anything worth more than your soul?" (Matthew 16:25 NLT).

If there is a biblical word for *succeed*, it's the one Jesus uses here. We usually translate it as *gain*. It's the same word Matthew uses for the servants who shrewdly invested the money given them to "gain" more (25:16-17). It's the word the apostle Paul uses to speak of "gaining" new people to the faith (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). But even there, Paul understands this word in the light of the cross—becoming weak to save the weak—much in the same way that Jesus used it. Paul has given up everything and regarded it as rubbish, that he might "gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). It's succeeding as shedding, succeeding as humility, succeeding as becoming smaller in order to be in and with Christ. "He must increase," said Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. "But I must decrease" (John 3:30). So it is with us.

Photo by Brad Roth

What this means is that the suburban megachurch is not the measure of God's victory. That model is not going to be a workable model for the rural context. Much of the growth of the megachurch depends on discontent—the same discontent that advertisers actively seek to cultivate in their target audiences. It's the discontent of the consumer who is encouraged never to settle for anything less than the biggest and best.

But this will not do in rural places, where we must learn the art of loving dying things and dying people, and where we must do the hard work of remaining in community even in the face of disappointment. In rural places, we don't have the luxury of pitching our gnarly community and starting over in a better circle of relationships where the grass is greener and the music better. It's just *us* out here. We're going to be working and shopping and rubbing elbows with the same group of people for a long time. We all share the same neighborhood.

In rural places, we don't have the luxury of pitching our gnarly community and starting over in a better circle of relationships where the grass is greener and the music better. It's just *us* out here.

We cannot content ourselves with defining success based on numbers, but there is one way that numbers matter. There comes a time when, after we have done the work of weirding the axes, we carefully and hesitantly count heads, not because numbers equal success, but because numbers point to human lives, and the church is in the business of embodying the gospel among human lives. We will ask ourselves whether we are effectively reaching out into our communities, and if not, we ask why. Growth in numbers is good and vital; it's just not the only way we measure the church.

We'll remember that "day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). The Lord did it. Not the talented preachers. Not the amazing program directors. Not even the apostles. The church lived the gospel and shared the gospel, but it was the Lord who added to their numbers. Their success came in the preceding verses, in the ways that they embodied the gospel.

How can we embody the gospel among new people? This is a question of growth that can only be met through the humble practices of relating and listening folks into the kingdom, even as we deepen our commitment to Christ-like authenticity.

Relating: getting beyond "The Wave"

In our community, as in a lot of rural towns, there are no stop signs on side streets. The streets simply cross each other, and when we meet at an intersection, we have to figure it out on our own. There's nothing to instruct us, not even a yield sign. Moving through the intersection requires an interpersonal interaction. We go by watchfulness and a wave. *The Wave*.

We wave to people on the side of the street. We wave on the country roads. (There are no signs out there, either.) We greet each other in the grocery store. It's all about acknowledging and reinforcing relationships.

Rural communities are profoundly interrelated through work, blood, and general neighborliness. My granddaddy and yours were friends (or rivals), and so are we. These communitarian sensibilities lend themselves to a sense of interconnectedness. But there are also dangers.

We sometimes fall under the mistaken belief that The Wave constitutes a relationship. We can think that because we are generally friendly with one another—because we allow someone to go before us in line or we talk about the weather in the post office—that we are in relationship, even in communion. But it is necessarily not so. The Wave is not relationship. Of course, The Wave can lead to talking on the sidelines of the soccer game, to deep sharing over coffee, and thus to relationship. But The Wave, on its own, is not enough.

Growing congregations are relationally oriented. Evangelism means forming relationships in rural places.

Developing, or recovering, our capacity to authentically relate to people is vital to becoming the kinds of congregations God needs in the rural neighborhood. Growing congregations are relationally oriented. Evangelism means forming relationships in rural places. We have the luxury of practicing the patient arts of kindness and presence, of getting to know people and sharing the gospel with them where they're at. Trying to hit people up with the gospel on first encounter, on the fly, will not do. First, we build relationships.

Look at the apostle Peter's first letter. Peter reminded the church that "if someone asks you about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it" (1 Peter 3:15 NLT). This asking presumes that followers of Jesus will find themselves—will actually *place* themselves—in situations where others will bump up against them and notice their Christian faith. There will be wonder. There will be puzzlement. There will be questions. *What is your hope?* "Be ready," says Peter, "to explain it."

Photo by Cara Rufenacht

This means that in our rural communities, we have to be ready and open to forming relationships. This might not sound like much, but authentic relationship requires us to glance up from the smartphone, look away from the television, and be with people. It's going out to connect. The gospel is about connecting people into the community of Christ. The kingdom is lived into being one relationship at a time.

Connecting with people will require us to hold a full-bodied vision of neighborliness, not a shallow view of people based on their value to us as evangelistic targets. We care about them as human beings, not as warm bodies in the pews. We don't count them; we relate to them.

I've had to grow into this reality in my own ministry. I've moved from a caffeinated desire to invite to church everyone I meet, and have learned instead to simply relate to people as people. I've developed more of a willingness to give the relationship a chance to grow. I've come to trust that God won't drop the ball. Learning this lesson has saved me from alienating folks. Spring the church invitation too quickly, and they peg you as just another salesperson more interested in getting them into the pews than getting to the heart of their stories. It's not hard for people to figure out. If all I care about is inviting them to church, then they know exactly what I am—just another mercenary.

Jesus demonstrates authentic relating in his own life. He was constantly relating people into the kingdom. Through a mix of pastoral acumen and prophetic foresight, he tapped men and women for

discipleship. He saw Simon and Andrew on the beach and said, "Follow me." He spotted Matthew in the tax booth and said, "Follow me." He found Philip and said, "Follow me." Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead." "Take up your cross." "Pick up your mat." "Follow me."[7] For Jesus, discipleship is inviting people into ongoing relationship. Jesus relates them into the kingdom.

Among pastors I interviewed, relationships factored heavily into congregational growth. One pastor, Richard Early out of Lacey Springs, Virginia, has led a rural church plant since 1997. Pastor Early emphasizes human connections. He notes that there is often a sense of defeatism and apology among many rural congregations, but he maintains that small congregations have a tremendous ability to connect to people. "Don't try to get someone to come to church before they come to you," Early says. First connect people to you through relationships, then connect people to the church.

Pastor Jimm Wood of the Hope Vineyard Church in small-town Paxton, Illinois, says that in his experience, "It's only ... in being a part of people's lives that you get to share Jesus with them."[8] In the anonymous swirl of urban areas, we may bump into someone only once. We only get one shot. But in our rural communities, it is ongoing relationship that creates a safe space to share the gospel.

Not all relationships lead to the growth of the church's numbers. Margaret Ewen Peters in rural Saskatchewan describes how the roof of the local bar—which also happened to be the only nearby restaurant—began to leak. The owner had contracted cancer and fallen into financial difficulties and could not fix the leak. The bar faced closure. So Pastor Margaret's Mennonite congregation fixed the roof. The owner of the bar wasn't a church member. She wasn't a family member. She wasn't more deserving than anyone else. But she was their neighbor, and the congregation found a way to relate to her in generosity and kindness.

In our own neighborhood in Moundridge, conversations about Jesus have followed conversations about whose class the kids are in. My family and I have taken the time to relate to the folks next door. We've done the human work of becoming neighbors.

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[7] See Matthew 4:19, 9:9; John 1:43; Luke 9:60; and Mark 2:11.

[8] Michael Houle and Jimm Wood, "How to Do Evangelism in Small Towns" (lecture, 2016 Small Town Church Planting and Doing Church Conference, Lancaster, Ohio, May 19-21, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J_SqQjA64E&feature=youtube.

Listening: evangelism means sitting down in the dark with someone

Just as we can relate people into the kingdom, so, too, we can listen people into the kingdom. Just look at Jesus. Even in the most obvious situations, he took time to listen. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:51). His call to discipleship had an invitational air: "Come and see" (John 1:39). He spent time alone, sharpening his ability to listen to God (Matthew 14:13, for example), and thus to others. For Jesus, listening was an act of openness to the *other*. It was an act of love.

Think again of Peter's words on sharing faith. He told the church to testify to their hope in a "gentle and respectful way" (1 Peter 3:16). I like the literal translation of the word for "respectful" here: *phobos*, fear. It makes me think of Paul's reminder that we must work out our salvation with "fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). We walk carefully up to the burning bush of other people's stories. We are a little afraid to stand before something so holy and powerful. We take off our shoes.

We speak with "humility." This means not barging in. It means not interrupting and pushing our way to the front of the narrative line, but rather creating spaces where people's authentic hope comes out as testimony, as response, as openness. It's like James's words—"Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry" (James 1:19).

This is about hearing people's stories, and when we have heard them, humbly identifying that-of-God we've heard in them. We don't watch for the slipups and stumbles and sin so that we can convince them of their need for redemption. That's all there, but it's not our focus. Our goal is to listen. This person is precious in God's sight. So is her story.

I've never known anyone to find their way into the kingdom without first being listened to.

I've never known anyone to find their way into the kingdom without first being listened to. People don't want to be indoctrinated. They want to be heard. Think of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. He spoke, and he listened. She asked questions, and he responded. He initiated the conversation not with a doctrinal statement, but with a statement of his sheer need, "Can you give me a drink?" (John 4:7).

This was not the usual way for a teacher to interact with a Samaritan woman. In fact, she would have been doing entirely too much talking for

most rabbis. The woman asked, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" "Where do you get that living water?" "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" (John 4:9, 11-12). She told her story: "I have no husband" (John 4:17). She shared her deeply held belief: "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).

In all of this, Jesus certainly spoke. He certainly taught. But he did so in such a way that the woman at the well was heard. Her story became a doorway for God's story.

Part of what this means is that in rural congregations, we don't need to learn some sort of "effective" evangelistic strategy; we need to learn to listen. We need to cultivate an openness to the stories of others. We need to ask questions, keep quiet, value their story, and then with humility and fear, speak our truth. Evangelism isn't about getting up on a soapbox and preaching at someone. It's about sitting beside that person and turning down the volume.

At the congregation I served in Washington state, it was the pastor's job to pull the trash bins to the street on Monday nights. With everything else going on, that was often the last thing I did—a quick dash down to the front of the church and into a dark cranny formed by an outstretched arm of bushes.

One evening, as I made my usual sprint between putting boys to bed and snatching some quality time with my wife, I slipped out of our house and down across the lawn to the church. I stepped into the shadows at the front of the church and grabbed the back of the trash bin. And I froze. There, in that darkness, I could feel someone watching me. As my eyes adjusted, I made out the silhouette of a young man sitting in the far corner, face lost in the shadows of a hoodie. Cigarette smoke wafted my way. It was just me and him and a trash can.

Several thoughts went through my head. Our town was being torn up by gang violence around that time. Was this young man in a gang? What was he doing down here? Maybe I should just pull out the trash and keep right on going—pretend I didn't see anything.

But I set the bin down, brushed off my hands, and walked over to introduce myself. It turned out that he was a teenager looking for a peaceful place to escape from it all. Where better than in the dark embrace of the church? Um, OK, well, good to meet you.

It became our little routine—or at least my little routine. Each week as I went down to take out the trash, I looked to see if he was there. Sometimes he was. Sometimes he wasn't. At one point in our running nighttime conversation, I sat down beside him in the dark. We talked about life, how he lived with his mom, how he wasn't from around here, how he didn't know anyone his own age. And then one night, in humility and fear, I popped the question, "So, do you know who Jesus is?"

I'll admit, the conversation didn't get much further than that. He didn't have much use for faith just then, and I'm not a very good evangelist. Eventually, he stopped coming around. Maybe I scared him off. I'd bump into him sometimes around town during the day, but it was never the same, nothing like our smoky nighttime conversations by the trash can.

Nevertheless, this is what I think of when I think of evangelism. It's waiting and patience. It's taking the time to listen to the other person's story. Evangelism means sitting down in the dark with someone.

Authenticity: becoming ourselves in Christ

I once bought a fake Rolex watch. I knew it was fake. The real deal sells for a bit more than the $20 I put down, and you tend to not find them on the corner of a Venezuelan cheap goods market. But I was a kid on a mission trip, and I was fascinated by the idea that a fake Rolex existed. And, hey, it didn't look half bad.

According to my youth pastor, who claimed to know about such things, the motion of an authentic Rolex doesn't tick. It *glides*. The second hand traces a clean arc, as smooth as Ben Franklin's rounded cheek. My gold-tone watch, with its herky-jerky tick-tock, was, thus, conclusively, a fake.

In the apostle Peter's advice on evangelism, he told his readers to share their faith in "a gentle and respectful way" and to "keep your conscience clear" (1 Peter 3:15-16 NLT). They weren't to ladle on the details and concoct a dramatic conversion story. Keep it simple. Keep it authentic. Keep your conscience clear. This is no place for fakes.

No doubt this is good advice for Christians at all times and places, but I suspect it's particularly vital that rural congregations hear Peter's call to authenticity. So often, rural congregations have forgotten the art of sharing their faith. In the absence of a gentle, humble evangelistic idiom, they flail about for something and end up latching on to a

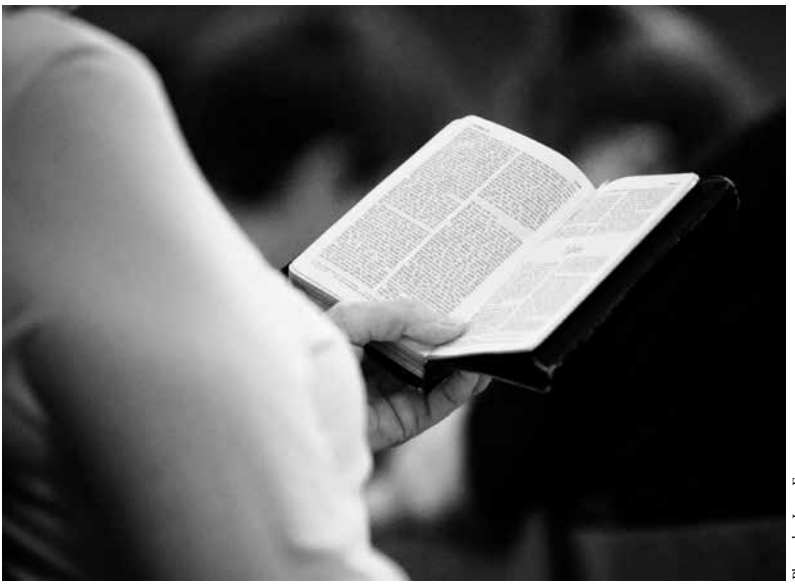

Photo by Isaac Fast

salesmanship model. At its worst, it's the slick pitch of the televangelist. It's the altar call week in and week out. It's emotionalism and manipulation.

Or, rather than cultivating authenticity, in many rural congregations we hear the constant chorus that "everything must change." This has a ring of faithfulness—change happens, so work with it rather than against it. Adapt to the needs and expectations of society to reach people for the gospel. The idea would seem dabbed with a bit of sacred gilt by Paul's words in 1 Corinthians: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (9:22).

Yet in our righteous desire to contextualize the gospel—to "become all things to all people"—we inevitably fall prey to our own and our culture's worst impulses. We end up shaving anything from the gospel that might offend or inconvenience those we seek to win. In our tinkering with the gospel chemistry, however, we rarely know what the effects will be on the church in years to come. Think about it: What will it mean for the identity of a people and the life of a congregation when Mother's Day has become a higher holy day than Easter?

Christ-like authenticity means recognizing that what we are becoming with God's help will often look very different from what a congregation is becoming in the city or the suburb.

I fear the effects of *everythingmustchangeism* upon our rural congregations. Almost inevitably, instead of finding ourselves more deeply loving and challenging our communities, we accommodate in subtle ways to our culture's underlying ways of thinking. Or we end up imitating what big churches are doing in the suburbs.

A commitment to authenticity gets us at least part of the way to where we need to go. Authenticity is the gospel principle of claiming and living our story as a unique expression of Christ's story. Authenticity is ultimately about becoming more Christ-like. It touches on care for place and particularity. It's remembering that there is no church in the abstract that we can commit to and love. Just as we marry this woman or this man, so, too, we inhabit this church with its rich, and occasionally sordid, history. We claim it. We claim our congregation's particular history and identity in our rural community.

Christ-like authenticity means recognizing that what we are becoming with God's help in our rural communities will often look very different

from what a congregation is becoming in the city or the suburb. Our authentic Timex will be more dignified than a knock-off Rolex.

The growth of the church is ultimately about our becoming more authentically Christ-like, and in that becoming, offering ourselves to the world. Christlikeness is the measure of our growth. Even as we seek to relate and listen new people into the kingdom, the deeper question is always whether we are becoming more authentically ourselves in Christ. It's about how we're embodying the Jesus Way in our rural neighborhood. Jesus gives us what we need to do it. That's weirding the axes. That's what it means to grow.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Would you define your congregation as declining, holding steady, or growing? Why?

2. What are ways that you measure growth in your congregation? What other axes might you need to add to your understanding of growth?

3. In what ways is your understanding of "success" challenged by this booklet?

4. What strategies have you or your congregation attempted to connect new people to Christ? How has that gone for you?

5. Do you agree with Roth that "evangelism means forming relationships in rural places?"

6. Roth writes that "evangelism means sitting down in the dark with someone." What are ways that you have done that in your own context?

7. How do you practice the gospel arts of building relationships, listening, and becoming authentically Christ-like in your congregation and community?

8. Roth quotes a pastor who says, "Don't try to get someone to come to church before they come to you." What do you think of this?

9. What is your congregation's unique identity in your community? Are there parts of that identity that you can highlight and embrace as you look to the future?

10. How do you see your own personal growth in Christlikeness being linked to the growth of the church?

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No. 24 Paula Killough, *The "M" Word: My personal awakening to God's work* (2017).*

No. 25 Brad Roth, *Growing the church in the rural neighborhood* (2017).*

*Available in Spanish.

Growing the church in the rural neighborhood

If you are inclined to use words like "depressed," "declining," or "disappearing" to describe the state of rural churches today, you will find hope in reading this booklet. Brad Roth, himself a pastor in small-town Moundridge, Kansas, believes it is time to take a new look at the rural church reality. "In a lot of ways," he writes, "the question is not can it grow, but where is it growing" (p. 1).

Roth is not unrealistic about the challenges rural churches face. But he is hopeful. Ultimately, he says, the growth of the church is about our "becoming more authentically Christ-like, and in that becoming, offering ourselves to the world" (p. 20). This is sound counsel for faith communities everywhere … including those in rural settings.

—James R. Krabill
Mennonite Mission Network

Brad Roth serves as pastor at West Zion Mennonite Church in Moundridge, Kansas. He grew up baling hay, tending sheep, and shearing Christmas trees on a farm in Illinois. He is a graduate of Augustana College, Harvard Divinity School, and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Brad has a heart for serving God and God's people in rural communities. He is passionate about sharing faith in word and deed and living out God's love in the community. He and his wife, Lici, enjoy bicycling, tending a garden, keeping chickens, and playing with their two sons. He writes about encountering God in the everyday at DoxologyProject.com.

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