

Bivocational Church Planting Models

If Southern Baptists are to be key catalysts for church planting movements in North America, we must impact the high population centers. But we must also maintain a strong emphasis on town and country church planting. It is not either/or, but both. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, approximately 40% of all counties are at least $\frac{3}{4}$ rural, or town and country. The U. S. Census defines any area, designated as a census place, with a population of less than 2,500 as rural. There are 799 counties that are completely rural. As many as 30% of these counties may not have any Southern Baptist work.

Three years ago we created a new national missionary position for town and country church planting. George Garner came from an ADOM position in Eastern Colorado to serve in this new position. George, as our Town and Country Church Planting National Missionary, is doing a masterful job in leading this work and is helping us keep town and country partners as an integral part of all we do. The following comes to you from George Garner.

Leadership Models

A critical issue in rural church planting is securing capable pastoral leadership. If one limits himself to being a “full funded” pastor, he most likely will not be willing to be a church planting pastor or an existing church pastor in slow growth rural areas. The brightest and sharpest pastor-leaders are a must for successful church plants in rural areas. The small rural church in North America can be one of the most exciting ministries. However, because the small congregation in a rural area may not have the potential to ever “fully fund” a pastor-leader, other models must be sought.

Three leadership models for rural church plants are the:

- bivocational model
- Mission Service Corps model
- lay planter model

Some students entering our seminaries are doing so with the idea of intentionally becoming a **bivocational church planter or pastor**. Some have a trade or occupation that will allow the freedom to also be a pastor-leader. Bivocational pastors are nothing new. It was the farmer-preacher that facilitated the expansion of Baptist churches on the frontier. Many Southern Baptist churches in established areas have a bivocational pastor.

An example of the **Mission Service Corps** model is Richard Keith. Richard retired from the Wall Street Journal in Orlando, Florida, as a maintenance engineer. He had also been a bivocational pastor. Richard and Sharon came to Eastern Colorado for a two-month church strengthener assignment. This meant they funded themselves even to living out of their RV. While serving there, they helped launch a new work in rural Joes, Colorado. A vacant building was rented for Sunday evening Bible study. At the end of their assignment, associational leaders led the weekly Bible study. The following summer, the Keiths were asked to return for another short-term assignment. God used them to reach people. They again returned to Orlando. Finally God led them back to Colorado to further develop the Liberty Baptist Church in Joes. This time they sold their property in Orlando and planted themselves in the plains of Colorado.

Another model is the **lay church planter**. Using the word “lay” today often implies someone who is less trained or less gifted. By no means is this meant of persons in this model. This is a person who responds to God’s call to be a planter or part of a planting team, but does not see himself as a long-term vocational pastor or planter. If the number of congregations that are needed in rural areas are to be planted across North America, we must call out and equip an army of lay church planters.

Subsidy Breeds Contempt

Another concern in new church plants is the wrong use of outside financial funding. It has been proven that a sustained subsidy will weaken the new church plant. A good pattern in growing population areas may be to fully fund a church planter pastor from outside the congregation in the beginning stages. There is the expectation that the new congregation will assume its own financial responsibility within a given period. If this funding goes beyond a three to five-year period, including a yearly phase down, outside funding becomes a detriment to the congregation. Planting rural churches is much like planting ponderosa pines or junipers in the plains. In the initial stages a good “drip system” is needed to provide moisture for the roots to become established in that semi-arid environment. There is, however, a critical point in the initial stages. If the “drip system” is not removed, the tree will not develop an adequate root system and will become dependant on the unnatural source of moisture. It will not develop to become self-sustained in that natural environment. Outside subsidy for a new work is much like this.

Churches in rural settings need to be planted like they will be able to function long-term. Therefore, the model of fully funding a church planter pastor from a “big brother source” will most likely not work in the rural setting. This will work only if the rural area is one being caught up in a suburban sprawl where there is new population growth. The typical unreached rural area of North America is not like this. Rather, in these areas we have essentially “no growth”. Yet the need for a church to reach unreached persons is there. In this typical case, the bivocational, Mission Service Corps, or lay church planter models make for a more stable plant.

Indigenous Leaders

Another concern is the lack of indigenous planters and pastor leaders. In this case an indigenous leader is defined as a planter who understands the cultural environment in which he is working, has gifts and skills that relate to that context, and is well-satisfied to remain there for a lifetime if necessary. One way to insure this kind of pastor leader is to grow them up within the congregations of that culture. As God calls them out, affirm them and facilitate their becoming pastors and leaders right at home. Greg Scherrer, pastor of Hi-Plains Baptist Church (Limon, Colorado), is a good example of this. Greg came right out of college to the local high school as band and music director. A gifted musician, he is a native of Simla, Colorado, 30 miles west of Limon on Highway 24, and is right at home.

George Garner has given us some helpful insights. Some of the most overlooked opportunities for evangelism and church planting are in town and country areas. Look around your setting. Have you neglected to address some of the rural needs? Remember, it is an honorable calling to serve as a bivocational, MSC, or a lay church planter, and this is especially in rural areas.

