

### **Thriving Rural Communities Field Trip**

Bill and I recently made a trip to Durham, NC to visit a colleague that is doing great work with smaller congregations in the state. Brad Thie of Thriving Rural Communities met with us at Duke University to share ideas and collaborate on the great work going on in North Carolina with rural and small town churches.

We were encouraged by God's stirring of hearts in the churches we met with. God is doing a great thing in what were once diminishing, even dying congregations. Much of this is happening through an initiative funded by the Duke Endowment and partnered with Duke Divinity School and the North Carolina Methodist Conference.

What inspired us most was the opportunity to accomplish the same kind of revitalization here in our District and in the West Ohio Conference. The folks that we met with were interested in the work we are doing through Refocus and other small church initiatives here as well. A continued collaboration is planned as we all move toward a common goal of revitalizing rural and small town churches.

A new dynamic is taking place in the rural places we serve. In Brad Thie's (2014) article "Welcoming the Rural Voice"<sup>1</sup> he points out the unique position rural churches are in to minister to this new dynamic. He notes three "distinctive ways" rural churches are connecting with rural communities.

First, they make "space for community". As Brad points out, any of us that serve in a rural community know that a trip to the grocery store or hardware store is much more than shopping trip. It will take us twice as long to make the trip because we will be doing pastoral visits with half the people in the store. You will meet with Ginny in the produce aisle and listen as she updates you on her husband's recovery from surgery. In aisle 3 you run into your Administrative Council chair and share a couple of ideas about an upcoming meeting. As you check out you recognize the young lady scanning your items as a visitor from a few weeks ago and you invite her to come back again soon. You wave hello to three different people in the parking lot, shaking hands with each one. We've all experienced the way that ministry is done in a small town. Brad says, "Pastors in rural places are not Sunday 'one-hit wonders' in the pulpit. They live daily with the folks they serve."

Secondly, rural churches are "connecting to diverse American voices." There is a change that is taking place before our eyes and we need to recognize the shift. Our rural communities have become a place where urban dwellers are migrating too. The younger generation that flocked to the city to make their mark have started families and wish to raise their children in a quieter environment. In the article Thie points out that "Rural churches are uniquely situated to connect to the voices of a new America." The blending of two different cultures and dynamics is new to the rural community. Ed Kail elaborated during a recent District event that the thinking of rural folk revolves around the seasons of the year and is cyclical; while urban folk function in a linear fashion. Rural churches need to realize that when we communicate with our new neighbors they might be speaking a language that is foreign to us in many ways. They might not understand for instance why the "Apple Festival" is such a big deal in town or why the children get a fall break that coincides with deer hunting season. Likewise, the customs and worship agenda that we've had for more years than anyone living can remember may seem strange to them if they are used to attending a church that resembles a gymnasium more than a cathedral. Add to that the fact that many of our new neighbors come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds than what our communities might be used to, and it's easy to see why we need to make these connection.

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<sup>1</sup> Thie, B. (2014, Fall). Welcoming the rural voice. *Divinity, Fall*, 28-31

The third distinct way that rural churches are connecting to the community is through “valuing agricultural people and economies”. Many churches are beginning community gardens and food banks supplied with produce from local farms. Seeing the value of connecting the generosity of agrarian folk with the needs of the community builds bridges of grace. Connecting with the agricultural community of our small towns and villages is a great way to stay relevant with the needs of the congregation and those beyond the walls of the church. An added benefit for those of us in ministry is that we are often blessed by the gifts of the land as our farming members express their love toward us at harvest. I love going out to my car and discovering someone has left a bag of vegetables, fresh zucchini bread or a jar of homemade apple butter. It’s all part of belonging where we are planted if you will excuse the pun. Understanding the genuine way that we relate to one another in a rural/agricultural community is key to helping our churches thrive there.

The small rural churches in our District couldn’t be in a better position or exist in a better time to thrive once again than right now. Yes, times they are a changin’. Yes, the younger generation likes things we don’t (as you did when you were their age). Yes, it takes some getting used to. But, the call to make disciples of all nations for the transformation of the world means that we have to find them in the cornfields, feed store, high school football game, and the General Store. And when we find them let us extend the hand of Christ to them with a smile and a hearty country welcome!