



TURNER CENTER
at MARTIN METHODIST COLLEGE
Cultivating Thriving Rural Communities

Fixing the Narrative: Indicators of Vital Rural Congregations

The Narrative of Rural Ministry

People tend to talk about rural ministry in one of two ways. For many, rural churches are sleepy places where ministry is shaped by routine pastoral care. In these settings, the pastor's primary job is to go into a congregation and simply offer support. Pastors are instructed to go into communities and "Just love people." Certainly, people need to be loved. At the same time, far too many churches have set providing a welcoming and loving community with quality pastoral care as the primary mission of the church.

Other times, rural congregations are talked about as churches that are dying or on the brink of death. Steeped in a misinformed national narrative around rural communities, rural churches are talked about as stepping stones for promising clergy, or seen as places where clergy can serve out their years before retiring.

Unfortunately, rural congregations internalize both of these views, and come to believe that rural congregations are unable to have a meaningful ministry. Parishioners burn out, believing that transformative ministry is not possible in their congregation, while clergy wait to move to suburban and urban congregations or count the days to retirement.

Why These Indicators?

In 2010, the *Towers-Watson Report*, which claimed to identify a series of indicators that all highly vital churches all shared, whether those churches were rural, urban, or suburban. These indicators of vitality became the template to which a vital congregation should be aspiring.

A closer examination of their data, though, shows that their data is skewed towards large membership and urban/suburban congregations. Small membership rural churches, meanwhile, are left to believe that by adopting standardized techniques, many of which are based on urban renewal techniques, that any church can add new members and grow. Rural leaders try technique after technique with no luck, and quickly find themselves burning out.

What's Different About Rural?

A standard phrase that gets used in rural development is:

If you've seen one rural community...you've seen exactly one rural community.

In truth, there is no standard definition of "rural", which makes adopting standard metrics and statistics hard to do. Even within the federal government, there are more than 15 different definitions. Some rural communities are totally agrarian, like many in the Midwest. In the Southeast, many are industrial, driven by manufacturing. Still others are driven by tourism, such as Key West, Florida. Since no two rural communities are the same, rural churches need a flexible set of indicators that meet their context.

What's Missing?

In these indicators, you will notice a few missing items. For instance, there is almost no conversation of average worship attendance. For some rural places, growth in worship attendance is simply not possible. This is a truth of our increasingly divergent world, where people engage in many different ways. Combine that with communities who have a shrinking population, and it becomes clear that worship attendance is not the only – or even most important – metric.

There is also no conversation about the necessity of children and young adults. Many rural communities are transition to retirement communities, as baby-boomers move in to take advantage of lower property costs and access to natural amenities. Focusing on children and youth in these communities is a detriment to the church, ignoring the assets of present in a community.

Three Indicators of a Vital Rural Congregation

In working with churches, and relying upon research from others, the Turner Center has found that vital and thriving rural congregations share three key pillars of vitality. Importantly, these are not metrics in and of themselves, but rather they are areas in which rural congregations should strive to develop clear goals and context-based measurements.

Indicator One: A Vital Rural Church Has a Clear Theological Identity

Every organization needs to have a clear mission. The church is no exception. In a thriving rural church, members of the congregation are actively deepening their spiritual lives. They are curious about the God that they serve, and they strive to make a connection to their everyday realities. Sermons show the relationship between Scripture and Jesus's incarnation to the world around them. Laity are able to articulate or are working to articulate a sense of vocation about their own lives.

This theological identity also carries a deep theology of place. Congregations know their own history, and in their own language, they can identify what God is doing in their community. They can talk about the pain, hope, and joy of their community, as they see the story of God unfolding around them, through them, and with them.

Questions to Consider:

- How curious are we about studying scripture? How do we cultivate more curiosity?
- Can we articulate the history of our congregation as part of the larger story of what God is doing in the community?
- Do our members see a connection between scripture and their daily practices?
- Are we talking about the vocation of the organization and the members?

Indicator Two: A Vital Rural Church Has a Strong Commitment to Community.

A thriving rural congregation understands their community. They care about the members of the community, even those outside of the church. They know that because of their faith, they have a responsibility to the surrounding community.

In these congregations, they can recognize, cultivate, announce, and invite the surrounding community to participate in the Kingdom of God. For some congregations, this takes place in formal missions. In others, this is organic, as congregations strive to respond to what God is doing around them. Regardless, the result is that the congregation strives to face outward, and longs to see how they might be a part of what God is doing.

Questions to Consider:

- How well do the members of the community know us? Are there any members of the community we don't know well or interact with?
- What are the deepest concerns of the wider community? What are the challenges we are facing?
- What are our greatest strengths?
- How are we working to recognize, cultivate, announce, and invite others into the Kingdom of God?

Indicator Three: A Vital Rural Church Understands its Resources

At their most basic level, a thriving rural congregation is sustainable. It can pay its bills and keep the doors open. But, valuing and utilizing resources is deeper than simple sustainability.

Churches need to understand their own internal assets, and see how they might partner with other organizations to fulfill their mission. They cultivate strong community relationships, which enable missions even with a tight budget. Resources such as space and volunteers are appreciated and utilized. And, they organize themselves in such a way that demonstrates good stewardship of their resources.

Questions to Consider:

- Are our resources being utilized for our mission?
- How are we cultivating new resources (grants, partnerships, private funders, etc.)?

- Do we utilize all of our resources appropriately? If we don't have the funds we would like, are we using the resources we do have to impact our mission? Do we use our space and volunteers appropriately?

How to Use These Indicators

Importantly, these indicators are not metrics. Rather, they are designed to help your church think about the metrics they can set for themselves. At the end of each description are a few questions for your congregation to consider. After considering the question, consider setting goals for growth in areas that need growth.

Be careful when setting goals, though. Remember: participation is not transformation. Set goals that really help advance your mission. If you hope to grow in your theological identity, consider how you might measure whether or not people are growing in that category, rather than counting the number of people attending a Bible Study each week. Some measurements are quantitative and can be counted numerically, but many are qualitative – they measure the quality and rely upon observation and stories. Remember to use both when setting your goals.

Need help? Reach out to us at the Turner Center at Martin Methodist College by emailing Rev. Allen Stanton, Executive Director, at astanton@martinmethodist.edu.

About the Turner Center at Martin Methodist College

The Turner Center at Martin Methodist College is committed to cultivating thriving rural communities. Established through an endowed gift from Cal Turner, Jr., the Turner Center supports leaders in the church and community who serve rural Tennessee and beyond.

Resources for your Congregation

Rendle, Gilbert R. *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Rendle, Gilbert R. *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*. Rowman & Littlefield, an Imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019.

Stanton, Allen. "Allen T. Stanton: What Can the Rural Church Offer a Declining Community? Hope." *Allen T. Stanton: What Can the Rural Church Offer a Declining Community? Hope* | *Faith and Leadership*, 30 May 2017, www.faithandleadership.com/allen-t-stanton-what-can-rural-church-offer-declining-community-hope.

Stanton, Allen. "Community Engagement and the Rural Church." *Allen T. Stanton: Community Engagement and the Rural Church | Faith and Leadership*, 6 Oct. 2015, www.faithandleadership.com/allen-t-stanton-community-engagement-and-rural-church.

Stanton, Allen. "Rural Churches Can Thrive beyond Numbers." *Allen T. Stanton: Rural Churches Can Thrive beyond Numbers | Faith and Leadership*, 19 Feb. 2019, www.faithandleadership.com/allen-t-stanton-rural-churches-can-thrive-beyond-numbers.

Winchester, Ben, director. *Ben Winchester's Keynote at the 2014 Symposium for Small Towns*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 June 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOIMRJ-jc14.