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Preparing for Rural Church Ministry

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My theology diploma from Union University is covered with smudgy black fingerprints. It seems that the snacks for our upcoming Vacation Bible School had been piled on the stovetop in our rural church's fellowship hall. When the stove's eye was accidentally knocked on, the bags of Capri Suns and Oreos ignited, and the fire soon spread to the rest of the building. Since this happened to be the building that also housed my humble pastor's study, I fought the blaze with a garden hose until the volunteer fire fighters arrived. Once the fire was out, members of our congregation helped me recover the contents of my precious library from the charred building.

Curve Baptist Church got a brand-new fellowship hall out of the deal, but my sooty undergraduate diploma still hangs on my wall, right under the two that later came along from Southern Seminary. It reminds me of another kind of education that God has been giving me, going on twenty years now, as the pastor of a rural Baptist church.

I felt a strong, distinct call to serve the churches in my native West Tennessee as a college student, reading J. I. Packer's account of Richard Greenham in *A Quest for Godliness*. When the English Reformation was still in its early stages, Greenham left a promising post at Cambridge University to settle in the parish of Dry Drayton. The ministry there was about as exciting as it sounded! But Greenham believed that for God's renewing work to take root in England, some men needed to embrace the quiet obscurity of rural pastoral work. Patiently teaching the Word to the same people, week in and week out, for the long haul. So Greenham decided that *he* would do it. When old friends would ask him what he was doing with himself, Greenham would say, "I preach Christ crucified to myself and country people."

Greenham's was a jarringly different ministry vision from the urban church-planting or overseas missions that were then so popular in my circles. But to take nothing away from those vital callings, something inside me said, "God, let me do that, too."

I've been trying ever since. In college, I preached in any rural church that would tolerate me. Even now, I can remember a rather unfortunate diatribe against sexual immorality that I preached to a handful of eighty-year-olds at Midway Baptist Church. Then, weeks after

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graduation, my wife and I returned from our honeymoon and moved into the parsonage of Curve Baptist Church. I would preach to 30–60 saints there each week for the next five years. For the last twelve years now, I have been serving Sharon Baptist Church in Savannah, Tennessee (population 7,000). We meet in the middle of a hayfield, and we held a baptism last Sunday night at Indian Creek. People bring me Wal-Mart sacks full of garden vegetables, and I once canceled Sunday morning worship to help rescue cows from the flooded Tennessee River.

I've been a rural church pastor throughout my Southern Seminary experience. As a distance M.Div. student, professors like Tim Beougher would travel down to the Jackson, Tennessee, extension center to teach us from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. every Monday. I would sit in my little fellowship hall-study and learn online Greek from Rob Plummer. January and June were always a highlight, because that's when I would make the holy pilgrimage to Lexington Road for week-long classes like Daniel with Jim Hamilton and the Worshipping Church with Greg Brewton. I continued to serve as a rural pastor during my modular Ph.D. studies. The memory of staying in the commuter dorm of Fuller Hall for two at a time, packed with students from all nations, remains vivid.

Today, I'm still driving from West Tennessee to Louisville. This time, still to my shock, as a faculty member. But as much as I love posing as an academic, each Sunday, I'm still just trying to preach Christ crucified to myself and country people.

How many current students share my sense of calling to the rural church? I don't know, but I'm guessing that its smallness, slowness, and solitude make it less appealing than some other ministry assignments. But even if students dream of taking Manhattan for Jesus, the fact is that many of them *will* find themselves serving a rural church at some point. There are unique challenges and blessings in this work. So, when I can, I try to pass along a few lessons I've learned—mostly from doing it all about as wrong as you can.

There Is a Posture that God Honors

I arrived at my first rural pastorate at age twenty-two, hopped up on 9Marks articles, Paul Washer sermons, and Puritan Paperbacks. I had developed deep convictions about, well, *everything*. Naturally, I found much in my rural church that did not measure up to my standards. I felt an overwhelming pressure to *fix* it all, and I had the hubris to think that I could. So, I went to work: purging roles and pushing church covenants. Swapping man-centered gospel-songs for the majestic hymns of Augustus Toplady. Canceling the special music and the children's sermon. Eyeballing that American flag in the sanctuary and threatening to discipline Grandma Sadie if she didn't get her act together. I thought I was some kind of Josiah figure!

Six months in, I couldn't figure out why everyone seemed either uncomfortable or enraged. Or why I was so tense, frustrated, and unhappy.

At some point, I realized that I'd taken the wrong posture. I had been looking at this rural church as my own personal revitalization project. I thought I was the professionally trained

expert with all the answers, sent to fix everything wrong about them. I didn't take the time to understand my new setting, its history, and their practices. I didn't establish trust before making changes, and I failed to appreciate the grace of God that was already at work, long before I showed up.

As the Lord humbled me, he impressed 2 Corinthians 4:5 on my heart: "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ, and ourselves as your servants for his sake*." *That's* the posture God honors. I needed to relax. I needed to stop trying to fix everything and thinking that I could. I needed to simply preach Jesus Christ and humbly serve this particular people in his name. And I needed to let Jesus fix us all.

There Is a People Whom God Loves

Kevin Ezell tells of a seminary graduate who got fired from his first rural pastorate. Kevin took some men to help move him out, and, while he was there, he pulled aside a church member to ask what went wrong. Immediately, the church member replied, "He doesn't know our *names*. See all these boxes full of books? He's read all of them. He's super-smart. He's a great preacher. *But he doesn't know our names*."

It's easy to make that mistake in ministry. Whether we stay holed up with our books or get consumed with leadership goals, like numerically growing the church, or moving to contemporary worship. Or we spend far too much of our time focused on non-local issues, like chasing the latest, ephemeral online issue. We can fail to *love* the people right in front of us or at least give the impression that we don't care that much about them.

That *is* a mistake. The people in our rural churches will certainly not advance your career. They may fail to appreciate your most profound sermons. You may find their expectations for you as a pastor to be both unbiblical and unrealistic. Their sins, demands, and criticisms will at times exasperate you. *But they are the people of God*. In each of their lives, even in the most mundane of circumstances, God is working out the miracle of his salvation. He is calling you to not only recognize that holy work, but to join him in it, with fear and trembling, and joy. *What an incredible honor!*

So, learn to love the people of God. Know their names and take an interest in their stories. Spend unhurried time with them and communicate your care for them in ways that they recognize. And don't forget to *enjoy* the fire out of them. Psalm 16:3 says, "*As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight*." If your people know that *this* is your attitude toward them, then you will find yourself far better positioned to teach and to lead them. And you may be surprised to find them loving you, too, with a love far richer and better than you deserve.

There Is a Preaching that God Uses

John Broadus devoted his life to seminary education, but he also warned student-preachers of the danger of getting "educated away from the people." This was a particular danger for those students heading out into rural churches. If you're not careful, Broadus said, you can forget how regular people think, speak, and live. You can end up writing your sermons like exegetical papers—formal and stuffy, loaded with technical jargon, obscure doctrinal debates, and long quotes from theologians they've never heard of. A lot of educated preachers, he said, can't "get hold of the people," because they "don't know how to talk to people." So, Broadus urged his students to serve their rural listeners by imagining what it was like for them to come listen to that sermon: think not only about what they need to hear, but how they need to hear it. Distill all that wonderful learning into an accessible and engaging message, spoken in clear, simple language. "Talk like folks talk," Broadus liked to say.

I'd say that his counsel still holds up well all these years later. I've found that getting the message *right* in my study is only half the work of preaching; I've got to figure out how to get it *across*, to *this* people, in *this* place. It is my job to prepare a sermon that is faithful to the text, of course, but also clear, fresh, lively, and memorable to them. It's not that rural people are unintelligent—most of them can wire their own houses, operate heavy machinery, and grow their own food, for goodness' sake!—they just don't live in the world of academic theology. But they *are* hungry for God's Word. Many rural churches are in fact *starving*, having never heard a preacher simply teach them the Bible. With the training that our students receive here at Southern Seminary, they have the wonderful opportunity to *feed* them with the Word and watch them come alive under its nourishment.

There Is a Person Whom God Forms

I've discovered in my archival work here at Southern an entire genre of historic correspondence: the seminary grad who has accepted a rural pastorate and is now pining to get out as fast as he can. He misses the camaraderie of his classmates, the intellectual stimulation of campus life, and the sophistication and amenities of Louisville. Now he is stuck out in the middle of nowhere at Turkey Creek Baptist Church, facing many of the challenges I've already described, begging John Broadus to find him a more exciting and higher-paying position.

Some things never change. Students who leave the seminary today to serve the rural church today will still at times feel lonely and isolated. Out of place and ineffective. Unnoticed and unappreciated. Bored, restless, and discontented. It may well be that God intends to move them on to something different. But I caution them not to get in too big of a hurry. As I read the stories of Jacob, Moses, David, or even Jesus in Galilee, I find that God does some of his best work in rural isolation. It's often where he teaches us patience and perseverance. It's where he suffocates our pride and selfish ambition. It's where he draws us into deeper fellowship with and reliance on himself. And it's where he matures us into steady, faithful, useful ministers of Jesus Christ.

Twenty years into this ministry, I've come to understand that the Lord had a very different revitalization project in mind when he called me to serve the rural church. He's still working in me, and I'm so thankful.

Conclusion

Since that fellowship hall fire, I've discovered that you can order replacement diplomas when yours gets lost or damaged. But I think I'll keep the one I've got. And I'm praying that our seminary students today might pick up a few smudges on their diplomas in the rural church, too.[2]

[2] This article was originally delivered as an address to the Fall 2025 Faculty Workshop at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.