



Bridge the gap between rural and [sub]urban youth ministry

Rural congregations

When it comes to youth ministry, rural America has somewhat low self-esteem—and unnecessarily so.

While metropolitan communities have grown, rural America has gone through its own changes, causing many congregations to experience an increased sense of failure and isolation from their denominational bodies. Clergy are reluctant to move into rural America where full-time employment is uncertain. Program resources and training opportunities often focus on large, multi-staff congregations, church growth and specialized ministries—none of which meet the real needs of most small country churches. Survival is the name of their game.

How can a congregation in a community with a declining population, a flat or failing economy, a part-time pastor and a tiny core of children (who will most likely grow up and move away) remain faithful, hopeful and viable? By the grace of God and the enduring commitment of the core leaders, some do. And more would if the Church learned how to bridge the gap between rural and metropolitan life. Many opportunities for mutual ministry remain untapped.

Youth ministry in rural America *does* exist. Very few small, rural congregations have youth groups or paid youth ministers. They rarely have need of a *youth room*. Youth ministry in healthy, smaller rural churches is fully integrated into the life of the congregation. Everyone has value and age is not the defining criterion for membership or access to particular ministries.

For instance, in a congregation of less than 100 members, the 85-year-old volunteer organist is going to be away for a month so the members welcome a 14-year-old who wants to play the piano for worship. There is time during the announcements for John to invite the congregation to see him perform in the high school play. No one thinks twice about giving a group of high school girls the keys to the church so they can finish painting the kitchen on the weekends. Hospital visits are often far away and an adult-youth team provides a perfect combination of enthusiasm, experience and warmth at the bedside.

What makes rural youth ministry work

- Congregations don't try to copy suburban models. They meet local needs and interests.

- Ministry is primarily relational, not programmatic. And those relationships reach across generations.
 - Ministry reaches beyond the church building and into the everyday lives of young people.
 - Young people are valued for who they are and where they are in life. Children and youth are encouraged to use their gifts in practical ways.
 - Youth ministry and leadership development are virtually synonymous. Young people are encouraged and needed to take leadership roles as soon as they are ready.
 - Small congregations provide rich opportunities for mature faith formation. Faith and action are connected over time in a community that lives with high levels of interdependence and accountability.
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Rural youth ministry has much to offer Church

- Ministry is not evaluated by numbers and programs, but by the quality of relationships it nurtures.
 - Incarnational theology (God with us) is practiced as young people are known by name and affirmed as full members of the body of Christ.
 - The gifts of the Holy Spirit are recognized and valued in young people because they are needed for ministry.
 - Regular opportunities exist to experience the sacred rhythms of life and death, the wonder of the seasons and the power of creation.
 - All ages are included in worship leadership and participation. Although challenging and full of compromise, true intergenerational worship is rich.
 - Elders naturally become mentors or faith guarantors in small communities where it is impossible to separate their daily lives from Sunday worship.
 - Church membership is an important dimension of rural identity. It is something of which to be proud.
 - Ecumenism is valued. Often, denominations in small towns co-sponsor special events. Doctrinal differences are set aside for common beliefs and shared dreams.
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What the greater Church can do to support rural youth ministry

- Avoid idealizing programmatic solutions and imposing them on congregations of diverse cultures and sizes.
- Keep rural congregations and their younger members in the information loop.
- Affirm what is healthy in small congregations. Provide opportunities for rural youth to tell their stories at regional and national youth gatherings.
- Use existing resources to build partnerships between urban, suburban and rural congregations. Plan a joint mission trip with your partner congregation, spending half the time working in the country and the other half on an urban project.
- Take the American farm crisis and globalization seriously. Plan an educational forum for all ages to learn more about what's happening to the world's food supply and rural communities. When informed, advocate for state, federal and church legislation that address the critical issues.
- Create educational resources that are easily adapted in small, intergenerational settings.
- Provide leadership to help rural communities understand the rapid demographic changes they are experiencing.

- Develop an electronic network to support youth ministry in small, rural and isolated congregations.
- Honor rural congregations and individuals who are known for their commitment to healthy youth development.

The Church universal is one body—across many miles—whose primary mission is to bring people into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Let us honor all parts of the body; we must not—by omission or through ignorance—lose a limb that offers important gifts to our understanding and practice of youth ministry.

Rural youth ministry can be vital, particularly when there is blood flowing to and from the greater Church. Rural leaders have much to celebrate and teach the rest of us. Remember one another in prayer, and reach out beyond what is familiar to build bridges of trust, communication and opportunity.

Resources

- Metro and Rural Youth for Service and Understanding: a rural immersion and hosting experience for metro and rural youth. www.shalomhillfarm.org/commonground.htm
- Center for Theology and Land: a cooperative program of Wartburg Theological Seminary and the University of Dubuque. www.RuralMinistry.com
- Non-church allies: 4-H has two good Web sites. www.4h-usa.org is the official homepage; www.4-h.org is their resource page by youth for youth.
- *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (1998 Upper Room Books).

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