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Brian J. McGaffigan

Caleb Ministries, brianpat@telusplanet.net

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Towards a Transformed Rural Church and Community

Brian J. McGaffigan

Rural living is enjoying a new prestige and interest in these days. It may be because things rural are perceived to be cleaner, safer, more beautiful, caring, a good place to bring up a family, or simply a place to garden. Is there an idealization of rural life? Alex Sims brings some reality when he writes of what he sees.

I see the rural community, not as a quiet haven to escape a turbulent world, but as a battered raft drifting downstream on a river of change. It hits a rock and part of it breaks off carrying away some of its occupants, while those that remain grapple with other bits of debris in a frantic effort to reconstruct the raft. As others try to scramble aboard this rural raft, those already on board are undecided whether to welcome them or cast them adrift.¹

There is a transformation going on in rural areas which is resulting in the loss of intimate social relationships, autonomy, sharing of work, visiting and the caring of former days. According to Diana Baltaz, farming "has changed from being a way of life to a way of making a living, and there's a big difference between the two!"² Money and debt have become the bottom line. Larger farms not only have meant smaller communities but also a lack of concern for them by the large operator. There is an extreme amount of pain where families tend to bury their hurts until something either explodes or snaps. The incidence of alcoholism, stress-related accidents and illnesses, family violence,

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depression and suicide among rural people is increasing. More women in the work force has influenced changes in the family. Off-farm work has also added to the loss of the unique and integrated farm lifestyle. Boundaries are being expanded as people now live in one community, work in another and play/shop in yet another. Rural people patronizing more distant centers are jeopardizing the viability of their local community, service and business. Change is sometimes accelerated by bureaucratic edict as evidenced by rail closures, school and health facility consolidation.

Rural Community

Initially community was a geographic place in which people—mostly family size farmers—lived their lives and had their everyday needs met. Some say that the stereotype of rural communities as being “friendly, family-centered burghs where everyone knows each other on a first name basis and where uncles and aunts and grandparents live nearby”³ is romantic nostalgia for the “good old days”. Rural farm communities have been historically rooted and stable, with the people bonded to community. But social transformation is taking place. Farms are expanding in size and communities are shrinking accordingly. Isaiah is surely right when he wrote: “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land” (Isaiah 5:8). Changes in values have perhaps not permeated as quickly through the rural environment because of its conservative and isolated nature. Serving neighbor and community are still vital to many people. Hence we see that although there is a real fragility in rural community today, there remains a tremendous strength which is vital to the health of society in general.

The Rural Church

Kent Hunter defines rural church as “a congregation of Christian people who live an agriculturally-oriented lifestyle.”⁴ In actuality, rather than rural church, there are churches in rural communities. There is a growing realization that the rural church needs to become more local if it is to survive. According to Bernard Evans its survival will depend in large measure upon how church is understood. He writes:

If by church we mean a community of believers, there is every reason to expect that the rural churches will be with us for a very long time. If, on the other hand we view churches as institutions within the local community, the question of their survival in the rural communities is less certain ...⁵

Rural communities tend to be small and built on cooperation. According to Shannon Jung, “given the pressures on small communities from the outside world, congregations that squander precious resources on simply keeping a building open, instead of pooling resources, are sinful.”⁶ The reality might well be that rural poverty will eventually force churches to work together to survive. It is now recognized that the days are gone where everyone was assumed to be a Christian and church member. Yet this assumption lives on in the “status quo,” making new initiatives very difficult, if not seemingly impossible.

Status Quo

The term “status quo” is a cultural term setting out the social position, rank, and relative importance of some to others. There is indeed a “pecking” order within rural culture. There is a sense that some church leaders not only accept that the status quo does exist, but that it has somehow to be appeased—unless a short pastorate is desired! The Bible does not allow for a status quo ministry because we are either going backwards or forwards. Therefore a new look at rural ministry is called for, to take a more “Apostolic” approach. Thus this clarion call to action in rural ministry—to call together those willing to count the cost and to do the work necessary for the Kingdom of God to advance in rural areas. Mistakes will be made, indeed have been made. But, as Bob Beckett states “a much more frightening prospect (than making mistakes) is the status quo, especially when we realize people in our communities are going to hell every day of the week because Satan has blinded them from responding to the Gospel.”⁷ Do we believe this? How enthusiastic are we for Jesus and His Kingdom to be established in our part of His Vineyard? Rural pastors need to become rooted, with a sense of responsibility to care for the place where they are and to live in fellowship with Christians who are committed to being part of a covenanted community. Where better to understand the issues of

living in community and to model “communities of hope” than in rural churches, where people are already intermingled in wide-spread family and social relationships, but which need development in a Christian context.

Church Community

Robert Banks comments that “in many places there is a trend towards building homogenous congregations rather than diverse ones.”⁸ But God really delights in diversity which is a fact of rural community because of the limited human resources. In a small town or village people from many diverse church backgrounds are present, are in relationships of some sort, and are beginning to see the need to stand and work together—even praying together—for the very life of their school and community, if not their churches. The need is to seek the common ground. From the world’s point of view this can make for strange bed-fellows but surely, when the most unlikely people are reconciled through Jesus Christ, then a commanding witness is given. This on-going struggle to bring opposites together is both painful and joyous. It is the ministry of Jesus moving people toward change consistent with the presence of the Kingdom. Bringing all these folks together in order to build a kind of Kingdom community requires a strong scriptural and theological foundation.

Theology as Local and Rooted in Community

The traditional concept of theology as an unshakable, foundational understanding rooted in scripture, of who God is, and what He has done in history for each of us, needs to be lived out in the uniqueness of the local situation. This local theology cannot be created apart from immersion in the local community by the pastor, who needs to be not only a theologian but also prophet and poet in the theological process. Theology is thus done for the sake of the community and is a vital part of rural ministry. Rural pastors best not set up their own idea of worship and progress, expecting to draw an eclectic group attracted to what they are doing, as the population base for that is not a reality. Inherited theologies do not fit well into experiences in rural ministry, which is forcing a new look at theology in order to make it more sensitive to context, procedure and history. Robert Banks defines theology as “any endeavor on the part of Christians to think through and set in order their beliefs, with the in-

tention of drawing closer to God and reflecting more His character in their lives.”⁹ This definition moves into the realm of spirituality and into the process of sanctification: how we live out our faith in our ordinary everyday lives.

Theology as Praxis

The purpose of God for an individual church must be sought out by involving the entire church community. This is especially true in a rural situation where the staunchly independent people must be perceived as involved and consulted before they will participate in an event or support any kind of change. Thus the concept of *praxis* needs to be understood and entered into by every rural pastor if effective leadership is to be given. In essence, praxis is the process whereby as we meditate theologically about practical everyday events, we see their purpose reflected back to us. Truth is thus discovered through an action whose ultimate purpose and value becomes part of the action. For example, the pastor is responsible to do the “stuff” of ministry—prayer, pastoral visiting, rites of passage, leading worship, community involvements—all the while seeking to discover the unique gifts of individuals and the corporate regenerative gift of the congregation. Encouragement to exercise this discovered gift then becomes a goal to aim for as the day by day pastoral activities are done. Praxis describes how rural community works. Someone expresses a need and if this is received by a majority, things will almost miraculously begin to happen. Praxis requires that only in the process of the action are certain truths discovered concerning the final purpose and goal, which means we do not pre-determine our goal and agenda.

The task of theological discernment thus belongs to those who experience the *praxis* of the Spirit in the context of ministry—in the context of a specific community and its culture. Thus theology as praxis is geared toward transformation. We need more praxis than practice. We need to include effects of the Word as well as a presentation of it. We need more than an academic theology for formal education does not impress rural folk.

The Requirement of a Paradigm Shift in Academia

Allen Schmidt comments that “when academic theologians don’t have pastoral responsibilities, they tend to build their own little worlds from each other’s books. At the same time when

pastors in the pulpits are cut off from systematic theology, they tend to degenerate into therapists."¹⁰ The need is for a new focus of theology away from the library towards the local church. The future church may well represent little enclaves of people holding to the Christian faith in a pagan environment. Feedback from the field to the seminaries is essential, and pioneers will be needed to go beyond the institutional safety nets in seeking "new wineskins" to foster spiritual growth. Robert Banks suggests new theologians will have to be relational as well as intellectual, servants or enablers, as they lead the people into new experiences. The need is for "apostolic" theologians who will leave their desk for a more down to earth pastoral life. This, according to Banks, will entail "a large drop in status and high degree of risk."¹¹

Definitions of Christian Spirituality

If theology is what we believe about God, then spirituality is how we live out that belief. Eric Dale offers this definition: "Spirituality is that striving for the transforming power present in life..."¹² Thus Christian spirituality presupposes a way of life and so to be a Christian is to live in a certain way. We also need to remember that Christianity won the day over the Roman Empire because it was not merely a doctrinal religion, but a religion of power. The gift and operation of the Holy Spirit within each believer makes Christian spirituality different than any other. Salvation is not just an event that occurs when we surrender our lives to Jesus Christ but is an on-going, life-long pilgrimage. Spirituality is thus the way we see the world, our relationships with other people, with God, and with material things. It concerns lifestyle, values and a way of life. In a day of counterfeit spirituality it is absolutely vital that Christians stand true to Biblical teaching, and that their relationship to Jesus Christ is seen as living, vibrant and attractive in both character and daily life. The search for spirituality is in essence a call to a transformed daily life where faith and everyday life become integrated. It is a journey of discovery. It is important to establish the realization that God wants us to walk in the Spirit daily and to grow spiritually over our whole lifetime. Francis de Sales wisely counseled not to expect transformation in a moment even though it be possible for God to give it.¹³ The Christian pilgrimage takes us into the Kingdom of God through a transformed life—through the transfor-

mation of the heart. Entering this spiritual reality ought to become the primary desire of our heart on which we focus our time, energy, and resources. Growth into God – the experience of His peace, love, and fullness of His joy – requires passion, courage, persistence, patience, time, and self-discipline, because no one drifts casually into vital spirituality. Surely in the beauty of nature, in the rhythm of seedtime and harvest, in the quieter pace of life, there ought to be enhanced opportunity to discover God. Christians in a rural church therefore, are in an opportune place to reach out and draw in those who are seeking, helping them to meet the living God for themselves.

The "Burning Bush" Experience

Just as the burning bush commissioned Moses to initiate the redemption of his people, so in the baptism by John, Jesus was anointed with the power of the Spirit to fulfill God's messianic promise. It is the burning bush that is our theological starting point. Jesus promised His disciples that they would be "baptized with the Holy Spirit" and would receive power to be his witnesses, and then He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:5-9). He promises that our Father in Heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13b). Therefore if the world is to have a vision of Jesus Christ in its blindness to God, it must look into the face of those who have the Spirit of Christ. Without Pentecost as the beginning, the church becomes the incarnation of a human ideal rather than the continuing mission of the incarnate Jesus Christ. The Spirit will not permit us to rest in a church of doctrinal formulations even as Shannon Jung points out: "Theology and pastoral care training are helpful, but in the end, it is the Holy Spirit who works the miracles."¹⁴ We need "to pray that God's Spirit will blow through our imaginations. We need to break out of the wineskins of the conventional and create whole new ways to seek first the Kingdom of God in our lives and in our mission."¹⁵ The foundations of "what is" have to be shattered and the new reconstituted. Innovators are needed who will take a stab at a new way and who are given or take the freedom to fail. Hopefully, people in traditional churches might begin to see that the most important asset to have in these days are pioneers who are willing to break new trails.¹⁶ We need Spirit-empowered leaders; spiritual invaders living in community. The

promise and expectation which led to the Pentecost event was in the context of a community of ministry, not personal edification as an end in itself. It was for the purpose of being witnesses (Acts 1:8). Pentecost is not simply a once and for all baptism of the Spirit, but life in fellowship and community. It is living the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount

If we are inwardly transformed we will live the principles outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. If we get our lives in line with God's principles, good fruit will be produced. Basic to the teaching of Dallas Willard¹⁷ is the sense that a person who will trust Jesus should be able to live the lifestyle illustrated by the Sermon on the Mount—a lifestyle increasingly free of the deepest roots of human wrong-doing. That is, a life increasingly free from contempt and anger (Matthew 5:21-26); from domination by sexual lust and disgust (Matthew 5:27-32); and from any desire to dominate and control verbally (Matthew 5:33-37). As these basic roots are dealt with we will also be enabled to live increasingly free from grudges (Matthew 5:38-42), and be able to love enemies and bless those who curse us (Matthew 5:43-48). As we live this life of the Spirit, character becomes embodied in us and lived out in the “everyday” events of life. These Beatitudes speak directly against what our culture perceives as “success.” They speak forth an uncomfortable challenge to most of us. To preach this kind of message pastors need to walk in that place of humble servant leadership along with the full authority they have in their person and position.

Leadership

Rural pastors face the reality of being involved in close and intense relational dynamics on a daily and on-going basis. Like the rest of the community, they are known intimately; but unlike the rest of the community, certain expectations are placed on them. According to Kathleen Norris, professionals trying to make it in small rural towns—especially ministers—make an easy target. She notes: “They set themselves up for attack simply by doing their job.”¹⁸ Shannon Jung notes that anyone working for the church in rural areas needs “to be strong, if they are to avoid being chewed up. It is a constant balancing act—between caring and listening, functioning as a catalyst or charismatically,

the role of a visionary and conflict resolver.”¹⁹ There is a built-in tension in rural ministry and potential rural pastors need to understand and consider the question of authority for authority and power sources have been in place for generations. A look at Benedictine authority is helpful because of its purpose to unify the community and direct its attention to God.²⁰ Benedictine community leaders had an internal authority based on the gospel that prevented them from following all the winds of social change. They listened to the community, to the world, and to God. They were always on hand to bend hearts, change paths and open minds—their own included. The intent of authority was to call, enable, raise questions, and shape the community to the values of the Christian life. In reality, (although often missed by rural people) the whole Christian community is to take on “a life-style, values and attitudes that are different from the society around”²¹ and not just the pastor. The dynamic force in a Benedictine community was the Holy Spirit, who created and sustained the community. Real authority does not come from a piece of paper or an office, but from the incarnation of the spirit of loving service that is ratified and celebrated by the community.

Disenchantment with Institutional Religion

A cursory review of various sources of literature reveals that people are reacting against a hierarchy of denominationalism. One person opines that “what God is doing right now is dismantling the denominational systems as fast as possible,”²² while David Watson wrote:

The old order of the established and organized church, relying on its structures and traditions instead of the renewing of the Spirit of God, will not do... everything depends on our ability to catch a new vision of the church as it ought to be, on our willingness to change where necessary, and above all on our determination to keep our lives continually open to spiritual renewal.²³

In rural areas focused denominational interests are becoming more and more a hindrance to the furtherance of the Kingdom. Structure has become a power system that is larger and more powerful than the people. Mead writes: “It is the kind of demon-

ic power that Saint Paul warns against when he talks about 'principalities and powers'"²⁴ (Ephesians 6:12). Good can become demonic when the system takes power and authority unto itself, away from the church it is intended to serve. The church of the future must break this power. Loren Mead opines that there is "a call to something genuinely new ... our task is no less than the reinvention of the church."²⁵ Amidst the chaos and confusion of our day, rural churches are in a unique position to develop new forms of ministry and clergy-laity relationships. The principle of the priesthood-of-all-believers needs to be applied and the Holy Spirit allowed to work amongst the people with transforming power. This kind of change requires risk—not only for the pastors but also the community itself—for change from what has always been is seen as threatening. Someone has to begin; someone has to be the pioneer-prophet moving into the experience at a personal level and then calling back to the community to follow. Church leaders need to ask the crucial question of how to support the pastor-leader as pioneer. Perhaps the denomination needs to be reborn? God is doing a new thing in ministry these days; there is a new paradigm being shaped—a new church is being born. The shape of this new church cannot be planned for or controlled. We can only act, trusting in God's presence in it. According to Shannon Jung, the emerging paradigm is one that "is much more compatible with the rural congregation's affinity for lay leadership and also local mission."²⁶

Because of the non-homogeneous character of rural ministry, the Word must be central and Jesus Christ proclaimed and lifted up. The need is for a deep sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in worship. It must be sensitive to the musical resources and needs of any particular congregation. In this area, pastoral leadership is crucial in creating the right environment for the creation of a common vision of God's desire. The need is to pray for an impartation of the spirit of prayer in order to break through obstacles. One area of strength that the rural church does have is that of a sense of community and relationship with each other. Rural folk have a commitment to the land—their place—and hence there is a certain stability. Traditional structures however can be very limiting in what can be done quickly as opportunities open up. There is need for new wine skins in rural ministry—new structures that will be Kingdom oriented—with leaders raised up lo-

cally. There is no reason why rural churches cannot experience revival with signs and wonders, conversions and changed hearts and lives. Spiritual giftings need to be identified. People can be equipped. This paradigm shift is occurring where “the Holy Spirit becomes for the believing community more the environment in which it lives than an object of its consciousness.”²⁷ To arrive at this point, risk is involved in entering into new relationships that are self-examining, mutually supportive and risk-taking. If this is to happen it means that rural pastors have to respond to a definite call and sense of vocation; have to embrace the Cross and be able to balance the prophetic ministry with the pastoral ministry of priest and servant leader.

Pastoral Call

Rural ministry is summed up rather well by one pastor as follows: “Being a rural pastor means being able to see and understand the sense of community behind a lot of hidden pain and feelings of loneliness.”²⁸ Ministry is a calling—never a career. Call has therefore a sense of oughtness. It is bigger than ourselves. It is a call to accomplish something we could never imagine doing or fulfilling with our own resources. It is full of hope. Jesus told His disciples: “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The disciples proclaimed the truth in word and demonstrated it in deed, doing the same kinds of works which Jesus had done: the lame walked, the dead were raised, and the gospel was preached to the poor. Ministry is founded, grounded, and defined by the prior ministry of Jesus, who went about preaching and teaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Thus we cannot view a place as a stop-gap stepping stone to another ministry into “greener pastures” but need to existentially enter into and work where we are.

Vocation

Because each person has a unique call, an understanding of vocation frees a pastor from having to compete with others for ministry. If rural pastors are to experience any sense of freedom in ministry they need to understand that knowing their vocation will free them to rejoice in the abilities and gifts of others—a ministry of love to God and neighbor with no calculated self-interest. As God equips pastors for their vocation, they will encounter success in what they are about—for success in the King-

dom of God is relative to the use of the talents, resources, and opportunities given. True success is really found in obedience to the Lord. A God-given vocation will be consistent with all of life, including marriage and family life. It will be lived out in a responsible relationship with God. Those called will be enabled to reach out to the world in which they are to minister. Besides the pastor, however, it is essential that all Christians be equipped to discern their calling in the world; for God is calling Christian men and women into business, education, politics, the arts and sciences, as well as professional Christian ministry. An understanding that God is present in the whole of life—private and public, in the home and at work, in the church and in the street, at play and recreation or entertainment—will become the unifying principle for ministry, bringing the whole of life together into unity. As pastors find security in recognizing and responding to their own call, they will be able to help (equip) others to do the same.

Equipper

In reality equippers reproduce ministry in the areas of their precise expertise and passion, and as such, equipping the saints is an integral part of who the pastor is. Trueblood put it this way: “The pastorate is for those who possess the peculiar gift of being able to help other men and women to practice any ministry to which they are called.”²⁹ Dallas Willard writes that “the leader’s task is to *equip saints until they are like Christ (Ephesians 4:12)*, and history and the God of history waits for him to do his job.”³⁰ Here is the challenge for rural pastors—to be able to encourage others in their giftedness and ministry. To be able to do this a pastor needs to be a servant.

Servant Leadership

Jesus renounced the use of worldly power as a demonic temptation, and chose instead the way of the “suffering servant” and the Cross. We need to understand that the needs of the world did not set the agenda for His ministry. Pastors need to grasp this concept of being a servant, doing only that which they see the Father doing. This of course will mean a closer walk with the Lord and a deep experience of knowing Him. This was the basis of Jesus’ ministry. His model of ministry teaches that servanthood comes out of the security of knowing that we are God’s

children—a security that sets us free to be servants. By being so secure in the Lord, a servant leader will never need to manipulate the people into accepting his own agenda, but will prepare them to receive and experience the presence of the Lord in their midst. This is the foundation for a healing community.

Priest and Prophet

To be able to speak into the community, a pastor must first have a heart of compassion for the people. The priestly role brings grace and forgiveness, and needs to be balanced with the prophetic, which sets boundaries. Prophets hear a message from God and are inwardly compelled to deliver it in black and white. They incite the Body to action, or hold up the mirror showing the Body what it has become. They intuitively understand the spirit of the times, or the cultural drift, so that their message cuts through those things that dull the spirit of Christian community. There is an on-going tension between the two roles of priest and prophet. It is a continuing adventure (praxis) as pastors discern their own souls. Paul, in his preaching, forced the crowds to make decisions. But he also called for unity in the Body. This tension in the life and ministry of Paul between the division that preaching creates, and the unity that the sacraments create, is still playing itself out in Christian history in the church today.

It needs to be said that going to minister in a peaceful, picturesque looking countryside situation is not a job for the faint-of-heart but for a called, committed, dedicated, and prepared individual. It is essential for pastors and congregations to have theological and spiritual preparation and an understanding of rural life and church, as well as the issues around the role of a pastor who gives leadership. It must be said loudly and clearly that our adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8) and will bring disappointment, discouragement, temptations, factions and confusion: anything to destroy the reign of God. All will come to naught if attention is not paid to the intensity of spiritual warfare taking place.

Spiritual Warfare

In many circles today, there is a growing awareness of the reality of the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. St. Paul states the nature of this conflict very

clearly in Ephesians: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Pastors as shepherds need a basic understanding of spiritual warfare because there is a great need to see the rural village for what it really is—no longer for what it appears to be—and to identify and resist the spiritual forces holding it bondage. Despite the fact that we have authority, spiritual warfare must not be entered into lightly. The enemy is real and anxious to destroy on every front. As in any war, there is a fight for territory and control of people. Thus we need to have our eyes open to the cost, at the same time as realizing that Jesus Christ has triumphed over the prince of this world (Satan) by His death, resurrection, and ascension—and in Him we have the victory. Nowhere is it more vital than within the rural area to become aware of the kind of “giants” which are keeping people from entering into the “Promised Land” of freedom and the Kingdom of God. These are known as spiritual strongholds.

Spiritual Strongholds

Things such as broken relationships, sins, and emotional trauma of the past cause hurt followed by negative emotional reactions, which sets up a sort of feeding ground for the demonic. Left unhealed, these wounds allow a root of bitterness to take hold that will produce bitter fruit. The only real way to effectively cut these roots is to first of all try to understand the past and then through prayer break the destructive spiritual power flowing from it. Ed Silvoso defines spiritual strongholds as “state of the art deceit”³¹ and as “a mind-set impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable, situations that we know are contrary to the will of God.”³² For Alistair Petrie a stronghold is “a sphere of influence upon and within our lives, families, churches, communities, cities, and even nations, that feeds upon sin (both individual and corporate, personal and inherited) that gives spiritual leverage to the enemy of God’s people, thus blinding them to the truth of seeing things from God’s perspective.”³³ This postulates the position that demons operate on a territorial level, as well as an individual one, influencing the development of our communities, regions and nations. Their

purpose is always to kill, steal, and destroy. It is therefore imperative that we learn to discern and remove the influence of evil forces.

Specific Rural-oriented Spiritual Strongholds

Folk Culture

Folk culture is that of people in a local area built and developed upon lived experience over generations. Values and practices become so ingrained that they are as “religious” beliefs not open to question! It is a very common deep-seated stronghold in rural communities. Shannon Jung, quoting Anthony Pappas, likens the rural value system to folk societies of developing nations, citing certain similar characteristics such as: the traditional maintenance of the status quo; life roles; the land as a powerful factor; experience and time perceived as cyclical; little value placed on self-analysis.³⁴ Many rural communities are interested in preservation rather than transformation, and the goal of the small church is often one of maintenance, not transformation; preservation, not change – which in itself is often seen as disruptive and harmful.

Community Spirit

Closely related to folk culture is community spirit. In small rural centers, “community” is a concept close to the heart of the people. The rural understanding of community however, is often a “counterfeit” overriding scriptural understandings and principles of life. C. S. Lewis writes of a false and exclusive community that divides instead of unifies: “some people are obviously in, and some are obviously out.”³⁵ He points to the sense of terror that some feel in being left out of the inner ring. Pressure of this “community spirit” to belong can lead to compromise and a loss of integrity by caving-in to something objectionable just to avoid conflict. In any small rural village this “community spirit” exists and newcomers soon encounter it as they begin to discover that they are outsiders. For true community (which is all-inclusive) to flourish, congregations must be willing to acknowledge and dismantle the “good community spirit” which over-rides concern for truth and calls for peace at any price. To not do so is to be absorbed into it and destroyed by it. John Dawson notes:

What God is looking for in us is an abandonment to His purpose without reservation; a people willing to pay the

price for true rather than counterfeit reconciliation. Cheap reconciliation papers over deep-seated differences by suggesting that we can have peace with God, by pretending offenses did not happen or that injustice cannot be addressed.³⁶

In dealing with folk culture and community spirit, pastors first need to accept the reality that a “community spirit” exists, that it is extremely powerful, and that its mode of operation needs to be identified.

Strongholds Resulting from Relational Injury, Division, and Brokenness

The majority of rural congregations fear change and conflict, and avoid both at all costs. This is because controversy might alienate neighbors who are in frequent face-to-face contact. According to sociologist Alex Sim, “avoidance becomes a high price to pay to maintain peace in a rural neighborhood or even to keep a small church from falling apart.”³⁷ For Kevin Ruffcorn, unresolved issues “lie buried just below the surface of everyday congregational life.”³⁸ These hidden issues and disruptions in congregational life become grounds for “enemy” activity and over time a stronghold develops. Pastors who are called to a rural church need to understand that they may well be dealing with wounded hearts for a long time. It is necessary to create an openness to conflict and controversy, where the causes of pain, resentment, and anger can be confronted. A pastor needs to stand firm against the inroads the enemy has made, recognizing there will be pain to bear. Paul put it this way: “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2 Corinthians 2:4).

Freemasonry

A large percentage of rural communities have Masonic connections at the very roots of their development. Because of the Freemasonry beliefs, the way is open for new-age thinking and a resultant dilution of the gospel and a syncretistic kind of worship. Anglican priest and founder of “The Joshua Connection”, Alistair Petrie, notes on tape that Freemasonry is “A Trojan Horse in the Church,”³⁹ with those involved purporting to up-

hold the tenets of Christian faith, unaware that masonry is the antithesis of it.⁴⁰ When Freemasonry has a foothold, church and community experiences a sense of restriction and repression. The good news is that when the stronghold is broken, people or churches can become a catalyst for redeeming a community.

These then are general strongholds common to rural areas, but each local region needs to be researched to identify cultural, historical, and social factors that might create influence for evil. This research process is called spiritual mapping.

Spiritual Mapping

The Sentinel Group have published *Spiritual Mapping Field Guide* as a comprehensive and detailed guide as to how to do spiritual mapping.⁴¹ In this publication the comment is made that “demystified, spiritual mapping is a heavy schedule of hard work, disciplined work. Those who are not up to community networking, rigorous research and long hours before God in prayer, need not apply.”⁴² We are all linked inextricably with the past, and so effective spiritual mapping can identify linkages and suggest ways of breaking them where necessary. By prayer, discerning of spirits, studying history, interviewing leaders and looking for patterns in current events, we can identify the primary strongholds and access points of spirits. As we gain knowledge of the enemy, we can then be fervent and focused in prayer to dispel the enemy. The underlying basis for dispelling the enemy (breaking spiritual strongholds) is identificational repentance and intercessory prayer against the identified problem areas.

Identificational Repentance

There is no doubt from scripture that national or corporate sin, just like personal sin, damages a nation’s relationship to God and needs to be confessed. Both Daniel and Nehemiah did just this for Israel as recorded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament: “While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people...” (Daniel 9:20). In Nehemiah we read: “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you” (Nehemiah 1:6). John Dawson calls this “identificational repentance” in his book *Healing America’s Wounds*.⁴³ He points out that it is a spiritual process

whereby a person or group identifies with and repents for the sins of another person or group. This is vividly portrayed in 2 Chronicles: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). The church plays a key role in this process of addressing the wounds of the past, for it is the vehicle of reconciliation in our world even though it is at times caught up in and bound by the same forces as that world. Hand in hand with identificational repentance goes intercessory prayer.

Intercessory Prayer

Dick Eastman states that "prayer isn't so much another weapon on our list of weaponry as it is the battle itself. It is the arena of conflict in which we engage the enemy."⁴⁴ We need to stand in intercession against forces of spiritual opposition from principalities and powers that keep people from responding to the gospel or from entering into the abundance of life Jesus promises. We need to pray and fast so that the power of prayer can be concentrated and destroy the beachhead that Satan has. John Wesley rose at 4:00 each morning and spent two hours a day in prayer. Martin Luther spent the first three hours in prayer so that the devil would not get the victory. Pastors must be "pray-ers" interceding for themselves and their congregations. They need to become as Ouranius, who was "a holy priest, full of the spirit of the Gospel, watching, laboring, and praying for a poor country village. Every soul in it as dear to him as himself; and he loves them all, as he loves himself, because he prays for them all, as often as he prays for himself."⁴⁵ Pastors also need to be supported in prayer by those called by God as intercessors to stand in the gap. Ezekiel 22:30 says, "And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap." Dean Sherman writes:

God is looking for people who will rebuild walls through intercessory prayer. Now we know where the walls and the gaps are. They are all around us ... the structures of society are crumbling. We are to fill these gaps as we intercede before God, and shut out the enemy on behalf of cities, families, schools, and individu-

als.⁴⁶

Evelyn Christenson points out that “a praying church is an evangelizing church.”⁴⁷ It will have a vital outreach because the eyes of members will be opened to see the spiritual needs all around. Praying will thus begin to intrude into Satan’s realm and begin to undo the work he has been doing, possibly for generations. Satan would convince us that we just do not have the time to pray. The work of intercessory prayer thus requires a daily discipline. Rural pastors need to find support outside of their local community—they need others to assist in prayer and just walk alongside, bringing prayer-aid to the battle, as well as insights for a clearer perspective. Spiritual strength and power is released when other pastors and churches join together in the community task.

Healing and Deliverance

Focused intercessory prayer reveals not only community and church strongholds but also personal ones. Kevin Ruffcorn points out:

Pastors in rural ministry ... are often wounded. In many situations these wounds have not had a chance to heal. They have been neglected, denied, or constantly reopened. These open and sometimes infected wounds have affected pastoral ministry. They have weakened the ability of pastors to minister and have clouded the visions of ministry and evangelism.⁴⁸

Truly, God’s purpose is to heal and establish relationships locally. Building healthy relationships is fundamental to a church community. Pastors are central to the process, and in order to get to a place where the love and compassion of Jesus can flow freely—thus helping hurting people—they need to allow God to deal with their own hearts first. The love and compassion of Jesus can only flow from “wounded healers” whose brokenness is being transformed and whose willingness to be vulnerable is evident. For all of us (whenever there has been abuse, pain, brokenness), recovery is not easy nor is it an immediate experience. Emotional calluses form to cover the results of emotional trauma, in order to allow a person to function. This is very deceptive because the pain is no longer felt. A tendency to believe that the

hurt has been healed can easily develop. But behind all psychological pain and brokenness, there is a spiritual wound that can only be healed by the love and grace of God as expressed by the work of the Holy Spirit, to set us free. A community of God's people together seeking to follow Him can provide a safe environment within which a painful past can be revealed. New life is born out of the pains of the past, and the more we are able to "come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostilities and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life."⁴⁹ The real "experts" of rural ministry are pastors who experience the "joy and the sorrow, the pain and the tears of the rural people."⁵⁰ There is no "quick fix." Time, persistence, and a consistent proclaiming of the Word of God to effect change is required to overcome the many fears confronting rural congregations. Saturating our minds in the truth of God's unconditional love and giving it out will do more to create a healing environment than anything else we may do. As we learn to receive and give unconditional love we experience true unity of the Spirit, and the church becomes a "healing center for the wounded."⁵¹

A pastor needs to identify with the people and pray with and for them. This is why George Otis Jr. points out the need of "remaining accountable, maintaining a devotional life and recruiting prayer support."⁵² Establishing and maintaining a devotional life is absolutely essential to being able to engage in spiritual battle, and to minister effectively. The concept of praxis is at work here, for pastors need to have spiritual disciplines in their lives to be prepared for spiritual warfare. As they become experienced and see the fruit of this work, enemy opposition will increase, as will the need for applying spiritual disciplines. Thus spiritual warfare and spiritual disciplines go hand in hand.

Spiritual Disciplines

The empowerment of spiritual disciplines is necessary in order to stand and to be able to do effective spiritual warfare. They help not only to transmit God's strength and courage but, with the Holy Spirit's direction, to open eyes to needs and problems along with possible solutions. As we practice the spiritual disciplines and become more Christ-like, the enemy backs off as he perceives the attacks drive us to our Lord, not away from Him!

Hence our spiritual strength grows along with the ability to do effective warfare. In addition to this is the priceless principle that when pastors and congregations experience the inner transformation that comes from applying spiritual disciplines, it becomes easier to build a vibrant Christian community. But spiritual growth is not automatic! While it is true that there are many natural encouragements for spiritual disciplines in the environment of a peaceful countryside, it is essential that spiritual disciplines are identified and formalized in order that they be taken on with recognition and intention. The practice of spiritual discipline helps rural pastors keep focussed on the Lord and to be able to challenge and give leadership. As maturity and strength develop, pastors are more able to mount effective spiritual warfare. Pastors who neglect a spiritual rule of life will end up in depression, burnout or simply succumb to accepting what is.

Spiritual disciplines are vehicles to help connect us to the power of the Holy Spirit so that we might be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. There is an agricultural metaphor that speaks clearly to the matter. John writes, "a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies, but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest" (John 12:25, NEB). In the case of a grain of wheat, farmers are very familiar with how the ground takes in heat, energy and moisture and, extending its roots finds further nourishment in the soil around it. This transforms the seed. Similarly, people are transformed by contact with God who is all around and within them, when they cooperatively interact with God.

It must be pointed out that human inner transformation, like that of the grain, is a lengthy process and does not come easily. Discouragement can hinder the practicing of such things as prayer and the daily reading of the Word, and is one of the weapons that Satan uses to keep pastors and congregations from bringing spiritual discipline into their lives. Indeed the prince of this world has done a good job of trying to keep people from the benefits of spiritual discipline. Even the word discipline has a negative, oppressive connotation for people in North America, where the individual's rights and freedoms have taken precedence over any sense of duty, responsibility, or accountability. Christian grace and freedom has for many become tolerance, and opposition to the active pursuit of spiritual disciplines comes from those who see grace in opposition to effort. Furthermore, a

culture given over to self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-sufficiency has infected the church. In stark contrast to all the attention to self, Frederick Buechner writes: "Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you a high and driving peace. I will condemn you to death."⁵³ This process of self-denial or dying to self as scripture defines it, is at the core of living out the Christian life. Dying to self indicates a process of pain and suffering which is a truth difficult for us to embrace. The process of allowing God to deal with the heart (which is deceitful above all things) is personal, lonely, and full of uncertainty, loss, confusion and bleakness. It is a movement away from knowing, to a direction so unclear that it is frightening. It is the process of learning how to lean into fear as we encounter what Janet Hagberg describes as "The Wall."⁵⁴ Spiritual disciplines aid this process and yet they are not seen as important for many people who want to carry on life as is, without any change to their lifestyle. In a society driven and trapped by busyness it is difficult to make room for spiritual discipline. Affluence and ease of travel mean many people venture beyond the local community for work, church, sports, shopping and entertainment. People are living busy lives and rush from one activity to another. In actual fact, spiritual disciplines are FOR busy people – to help establish priorities and discover what must be pruned away in order to draw closer to God. The practice of spiritual disciplines leads to an increased spontaneity in being able to do what needs to be done when it is needed. They will help us to be led by the Holy Spirit with meaningful responses instead of being pressed by circumstances and stresses into certain reactions.

Counting the Cost

Jesus said: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish" (Luke 14:28-30). John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that "whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of His fellowship ought to prepare himself or herself for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil."⁵⁵ Richard Foster writes of difficulties and a transformation of the spirit

as “God moves from the periphery of our prayer experience to the center.”⁵⁶ During this process we feel despair, dry, even lost. We experience God as a great void, but in the midst of it all we learn how to trust Him. As we are brought to a halt, God is better able to work His inner transformation within us. John of the Cross uses the term “dark night of the soul” to describe this experience—and it is painful as we feel forsaken and forgotten by God—abandoned perhaps. It is an inner anguish and disorientation. It is a stripping of our comfortable illusions and false securities. It is simply trusting, which makes us realize the vanity of the world around us. It also makes us long for the peace that passes all understanding. This upsetting of our inner life makes us very vulnerable, but it is essential to spiritual growth. In fact Elizabeth Dreyer writes that “Jesus’ witness, challenges us to choose to become vulnerable, to move through the dark night into conversion and new life [which is what lies at the] heart of the Christian faith.”⁵⁷ We need to trust that God will indeed “complete that which he has begun,” and that His work, His discipline, and His guidance is for good. This kind of trust helps give us courage to enter into the painful process of transformation of the soul even as the writer to the Hebrews makes note of: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). The early church recognized that a person’s life of faith was based on the pre-eminence of liturgy, the spiritual exegesis of scripture, and the leisurely reading of sacred texts. Prayer, meditation on scripture, contemplation (sitting silently before God), and other spiritual disciplines played a definite role together with such spiritual disciplines as solitude, silence, fasting, secrecy, study, worship, celebration, service, fellowship, confession and submission. In rural life many opportunities avail themselves to put these disciplines into place.

Solitude and Silence

Basic to all the spiritual disciplines is that of solitude. Time spent just looking over the land or strolling through the countryside is readily available to the rural dweller if the opportunity is taken and programmed into the day. For some (and this might happen to a pastor new to rural ministry), solitude can be experienced negatively as overwhelming and/or uncomfortable until

it is received as a God-given opportunity for spiritual growth. Solitude, working as it does on the soul, helps break rhythms that drive us. We become no longer driven people, always in a hurry. What is done in solitude is nothing. Many feel that they should always be at work, producing something of enduring value. The need is to stop being productive and deliberately break free from normal actions that tend to entangle and prevent us from hearing the voice of God. In solitude, perspective is found, freedom from ingrained behaviors developed, and inner tranquillity restored. Jesus often went to solitary places to pray and spent a lot of time in solitude being tested, strengthened, and refreshed for ministry. We too, need solitude for these same reasons. Therefore because of the tremendous advantages of solitude it is essential that we set a time and place for it to happen on a regular basis.

According to Henri Nouwen "silence is the way to make solitude a reality."⁵⁸ By not speaking, we break habits, which helps to cause our hearts to change. Primarily silence comes in two forms, the elimination of sound and refraining from speaking. James writes: "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire..." (James 3:5b). James knew that the tongue is a formidable enemy and that we need to learn to keep our mouths closed! As we become silent we will learn to listen, observe and pay attention to others, and we will become less skeptical and judgmental with no need to "gossip." Even in the rural environment we need self-control and inner discipline in the search for quiet and solitude. We need to turn off the car radio en route to work, or set aside a time free of TV. Still the rural environment is the one largely free from the din of traffic and pollution of noise in general. Quiet, broken only by the chirping of birds, can be as the "balm of Gilead." Increasingly city folk are looking for time and experiences in country living to restore the soul in order to face the stresses of urban dwelling.

Self Denial (Fasting, Study)

Second to the loss of solitude and silence is the danger that self-denial is becoming a thing of the past and the living of the Sermon on the Mount considered not only impossible but non-essential to the Christian Way. Self-denial, the disciplining of one's natural impulses, a central teaching of the New Testament, has been conveniently ignored. In our affluent world, discipline

of the body becomes difficult. In a very tangible way fasting allows us to surrender to God and allow the Holy Spirit to free us from addictions. It allows the Holy Spirit access to our lives to work transformation, to have more control, and to aid our Christian growth as its effects are diffused throughout our personality. It also teaches temperance and self-control which in turn teaches moderation and restraint. Fasting also helps us maintain perspective as we face opposition. The early church fasted two days a week. Wesley and his Methodists fasted on Wednesday and Friday. Fasting also strengthens the urgency of a particular prayer. For example Daniel turned “to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). Disciplining ourselves in regard to food or comforts sharpens our focus and gives urgency to our intercessions. Self-denial used to be a way of life in rural areas due to the seasonal inaccessibility of many items and the fact that everything possible was turned back into the farm. A certain ruggedness and hardship of simple living encourages self-denial. This has all been changed by technology, ease of travel, and the new attitude of living on credit in order to maintain a certain lifestyle.

In our busy culture, setting time aside for God is another form of fasting. One such discipline is study—reading, hearing, inquiring of, and meditating on what we are reading. It is prayerfully and steadily focusing upon what we are reading in silence. As we study the Word, we integrate it into our very lives and our life in the Kingdom. Study also involves reading devotional books, together with stories about the lives of disciples from all ages and cultures—making them and their writings our friends.⁵⁹ In general, the available silence and solitude of rural life ought to encourage the practice of reading Christian Classics and devotional literature as well as daily scriptures.

Prayer and the Presence of God

The monks of old usually built their monasteries in the countryside where they would be independent and able to live out their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Prayer was the focus of their work and the sustaining source of all that they did. The rural environment fostered their life-style and the same holds true for today. Rural pastors need to take advantage of the many opportunities for daily prayer as they go about daily work

in the midst of God's marvelous creation. We are to "pray without ceasing." Prayer is simply communicating with God about what we are doing together. It is central to how the Holy Spirit works transformation within us. As we enter the discipline of prayer we allow God the opportunity to draw near, helping us to grow into the likeness of Jesus. The Holy Spirit enables us to pray. We learn to pray by praying. As we thus develop in prayer, we become full of praise and thanksgiving, but are also brought to our knees in confession and repentance as the Holy Spirit reveals areas of our lives that need to be submitted to Him. It is from prayer that the whole day acquires an order and discipline. The famous monk, Brother Lawrence, while peeling potatoes, learned that the essential ingredient of the Christian life was "to remain in the presence of God daily"⁶⁰ and thereby teaches us to practice the presence of God in everything that we do. As pastors and parishioners avail themselves of the benefits of the rural environment to grow in grace and maturity, they will enjoy even more the great blessing of rural living—being a part of the community. There are several spiritual disciplines that help this.

Service

In some respects service comes naturally to rural dwellers as they are called upon to help by their community. Those in the farming community have tended to be rather dependent on each neighbor, stopping work to give a hand when needed. This quality still remains in the hearts of most rural folk. Spiritual disciplines can bring depth and focus to this heart to serve. We need to become servants after the style and order of Jesus who "taking the very nature of a servant ... humbled himself and became obedient to death" (Philippians 2:5-11). Engaging in service means to turn away from our position and status. It is to do things in secret where we will not be recognized. Thus practicing the discipline of secrecy will allow us to be content without any human approval "so that our giving may be in secret" (Matthew 6:4). Jeremy Taylor advises to "nurture a love to do good things in secret, concealed from the eyes of others, and therefore not highly esteemed because of them. Be content to go without praise, never being troubled when someone has slighted or undervalued you."⁶¹ What secrecy does is to allow us to place our public relations into the hands of God allowing Him to decide

when our deeds will become known and when our light is to be noticed. As Christians we are all gifted for service in some form. Peter writes that “each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10) while Paul points out that there are “different kinds of service, but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:5). Our motivation to serve is love (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 1 John 4:19).

Fellowship (Repentance, Confession and Submission)

Fellowship means to be with others in common enterprises such as worship, learning and service. It is to know Christ in others without regard to their human “qualifications” and to be received on the same basis. It is to allow for the realization of a joyous and sustained life in Christ that is normally impossible to attain by our individual effort. The Christian journey is basically a shared one where as members of the Body of Christ we become agents of the Holy Spirit in one another’s growth and transformation. Bonhoeffer wrote that “Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.”⁶² Primary to this kind of fellowship is the discipline of confession where we allow ourselves to be known in our failures. It enables us to drop the burden of pretense and to be truly humbled before God and man. It is good-bye to pride and relief from hypocrisy. Essentially it is entire transparency. Oswald Chambers says that repentance is “the bedrock of Christianity.”⁶³ Through self-examination we can become more aware of our true state before God. “Search me, O God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23, 24). Getting right with God opens the floodgate for God’s mercy to come into an individual and a community and for the power of the Holy Spirit to be released. Through confession, that which has been kept festering in the dark is brought out into the light and, being made visible loses its power, no longer being able to tear a fellowship apart. Dallas Willard notes that “confession alone makes *deep* fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality commonly found in our church associations...”⁶⁴ While repentance and confession open the door, yielding and submission are the ingredients necessary

for surrender into the fullness of the heart of God. As we surrender to God we give ourselves over to Him. We give up all our self-control. We lose our selves in Him. Submission frees us from the burden of having our own way and being all wise. It permits us to benefit from counsel, (Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, 20:5 & 18) and is the missing element in our society that no longer believes in wisdom but technique and therapy. Dallas Willard states: "The highest level of fellowship – involving humility, complete honesty, transparency, and at times confession and restitution – is sustained by the discipline of submission."⁶⁵

You would think that the church community would be leading the way in this but bringing any sense of mutual submission into the rural churches appears to be problematic at this point. Divisions amongst Christians abound. However it is entirely possible that given the right leadership, divisions can be healed and churches united in the spirit of freedom that we have in Christ. This might mean letting go of one's denominational loyalty for the community good. The Holy Spirit of God has a plan for the uniting of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Applying spiritual disciplines (which open us to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit) will build our personal strength and perseverance. As we grow in fellowship, and draw in others, extended community will grow and thrive. For this to occur we need to spend time with one another. It is for this reason that Sabbath keeping is a fundamental precept and discipline for building community.

Keeping the Sabbath

The immense significance of Sabbath keeping needs to be rediscovered, restored and made central in our lives. Sabbath-Rest needs to be understood biblically, not culturally. It is not just a day off nor, according to Eugene Peterson, is its purpose "to restore strength, increase motivation, reward effort and keep performance incentives high ... Sabbath means to quit."⁶⁶ Abraham Heschel writes "there are few ideas in the world of thought which contain so much spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath."⁶⁷ Each person has to appropriate this spiritual power for him or herself, which is difficult in our highly technical world. Our souls need time to catch up for the sake of life. In fact for Heschel the Sabbath is not an interlude on the way to somewhere

but the climax of living. It is *Menuha—Rest* that he considers is what God created on the seventh day. He argues that rest, as a part of creation, is more than “withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind, [but is] tranquillity, serenity, peace and repose.”⁶⁸ This sense of rest is of course what Christians have to offer the world, because Jesus came to restore it to us.

Sabbath-Rest is the acceptance of the sovereignty of God where we give up all effort to work things out on our own. We need to stop living by our own efforts and rely on the gracious provision made by God. We need to stop accepting the world’s value that achieving is at the heart of existence, as we strive and struggle for the security of things and power. We need to listen more to Abraham Heschel who argues that “time is the heart of existence ... the goal of which is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”⁶⁹

One of the great benefits of keeping a Sabbath-Rest is the addressing of the disastrous division between Sunday worship and the Monday workday. Perhaps the rural folk can help to restore the sense of work as an important part of life, not separate from it as we tend to think—even as we hear the saying “get a life” or “I have a life” (outside of work)! For a farmer especially, his life is his work and vice versa. It is incumbent upon him to insert the Sabbath rest, as no one else will give him time off. The importance of this needs to be taught and restored as many farmers become “work-aholics” for there is always something else to be done! This is true also for the pastor—there is always another sermon to write or call to make.

Shannon Jung makes note concerning rural ministry that “the call to a single-pastor church can lead to burnout, brought about by a lack of privacy, deep-seated feelings of isolation, and a heavy load of responsibilities.”⁷⁰ It becomes imperative for rural pastors to deliberately carve out time to feed their own spiritual needs. The rural pastor needs to practice Sabbath. When life is balanced on the center of keeping the Sabbath, work and leisure time also fall into proper perspective.

Work and Leisure

Pierce defines work as “all our productive daily activities—

job, family and relationships, and community involvement.”⁷¹ We tend to define work as that which we do for pay, but the truer meaning of work is simply “all human activity that sustains and improves the world.”⁷² Greg Ogden writes, “work is a place to serve God.”⁷³ Work is not therefore merely the way we make a living, but the way we give expression to our Christian life—an expression of being. Being good stewards of the abilities God has placed in us is also a fulfillment of the call to work. However work is often seen as the center of who we are, and what we earn has become the measuring stick of our success. In many ways we have become what we do. People seem to be willing to give more and more of their time and energy in order to keep their employment, status and securities—yet all the while counting the years and dreaming of an early retirement. Free time used to no purpose has to be justified. For the Christian, work is a partnership with God where work is seen as basically good. Thus all our work, all our secular tasks need to be done out of grateful obedience for the new life God has given to us. This ought to encourage us to develop our giftedness and reach out into the world through our work. Work in and of itself can contribute to our spiritual life. In this regard, many a farmer would consider his work to be a sacred trust repeated on a regular daily and seasonal basis.

There is a predominant world view where work has become a thing to be tolerated in order to achieve leisure which for many is not leisure at all but “little more than an ever more furious orgy of consumption.”⁷⁴ According to Volf, people’s lives today “alternate between frenzied work and frenzied play. Rest has been driven out of leisure.”⁷⁵ In fact we seem to have lost the meaning of leisure which has to do with contemplation, mindfulness and keeping our hearts centered on God in a world gone mad with activity for its own sake. We do not really know how to relax, never mind relating leisure to a deepening intimacy with God, one another and ourselves. There is indeed a real need for a Christian understanding of leisure that should be the growing time of the human spirit. It is not entertainment or recreation but more like play. But care needs to be taken lest play simply becomes another form of work. It has something to do with forgetting everyday life and leaving the real world behind. Rural living offers abundant opportunities for these kind of experienc-

es: things like tobogganing or cross-country skiing in the winter, horseback riding, hiking, or stopping work for a neighborhood barbecue in the summer. Even jobs like weeding or mowing can bring relaxation! Urban folk these days are taking holidays on nearby farms where they can feed the chickens, milk a cow, or pick berries – all the while perceiving it as leisure!

In considering the elements of work and leisure we are dealing with the issue of time, which is perhaps one of the most valuable – certainly irreplaceable – possessions given to each person equally, regardless of status or wealth. Time can be measured and used as each individual sees fit. It can be elusive; it can be stolen; it can be a severe taskmaster; it can drive us with high-pressured intensity. Some people live for the future and consider time wasted when not being used in a practical way to meet goals and objectives. Others of course live only for the moment and consider that there is time enough for everything. The only “time” any of us really has is that of the present moment. Somehow in this day and age we need to be able to engage our mind fully in the immediate while also resting in the process where we know God is at work and will eventually work all things together for good according to His purposes. Perhaps we can find help in this belief in the cycle of seeding, weeding, waiting for rain, and harvesting, both in gardening and growing grain. Despite worry and anxiety the cycle repeats every year, by the grace of God. Time is a gift of God to us. It is an opportunity to be responded to. It is to be filled rather than used and thus we can delight in each new moment, day and season. We accept the passing of time with grace. We can grow old graciously. Thus our spirituality needs to incorporate the routine for responding with joy to this gift of time. We need to resist the urge to rush through time, missing the voice of God and the signs of the Kingdom. We need to abide in Christ as well as serve him. Therefore we need a gentle and steady rhythm of abiding in the Lord and serving Him – the rhythm of life which comes out of Sabbath keeping.

In this rhythm we begin to realize that religious activities are not more important than the ordinary mundane domestic activities and work. We are members of families. We have occupations and responsibilities. We enjoy leisure with friends, hobbies and the arts. The whole of life lived out in an ever-deepening relationship with the Trinity and in the everyday world we live in, is

what true spirituality is about. It is not just oriented to the individual but is also lived out in the community where we work, play, pray or sleep. Thus all our activities in life—as parents, homemakers, students, business people, teachers, politicians, preachers or whatever our occupation might be—are each a component of authentic spirituality, and the call of God can come to anyone at anytime. As we submit to the various spiritual disciplines and include a way of Sabbath keeping, we will become more than conquerors and “while overcoming begins in the realm of the spiritual, it is executed primarily in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives.”⁷⁶

Everyday Life (Home, Hospitality)

Nowhere is the “nitty-gritty” reality of life more evident than in our homes. Home is crucial to the development of the Christian life—both inner and outer—and needs to be appreciated as such. Thomas Howard writes that in our Dark Age there is need for “lights burning in shrines and on altars, bearing witness to the presence of the holy.”⁷⁷ He considers the home to be one such hallowed place. He suggests it is a place where boundaries are set; where we give our lives for others; where within the four walls of the home, real life is to be found with mutual responsibilities and commitments liberated by love; where sacred mysteries can be celebrated. Home is to be a haven in a physical, emotional and spiritual sense—especially for our children. This sense of haven—of loving and caring—can be readily extended into the neighborhood, community and world where we are called simply to love, and become hospitable to the stranger, who may well become a friend. Home is certainly central to the farm, where there can be nothing else for miles around. Traditionally rural folk have tended to put high priority on taking time to be with friends over a meal, an outing, or time of conversation. In friendship, we experience one of the most profound gifts from God. As friends of Jesus we instantly become friends with others who know Him. There is a strange and unique bonding of personalities. Creating friendships requires hospitality, and strengthened by friendships, the motivation to offer hospitality increases. Alan Jones writes that the way of believing that he was seeking was “a way of hospitality that involves receiving others as lively images of God or as his possible messengers re-

ardless of whether they are believers or not.”⁷⁸ The concept of hospitality—the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and be a friend instead of an enemy—needs to be restored in our culture with its alienation and estrangement. Because of the isolation in rural life, there is still the tendency to give more time and effort to being with friends. It is one of the rural values to hold on to. Koenig points out rather dramatically, that “strangers who receive the most attention in the New Testament are disciples or church members who have suffered unjust exclusion from the fullness of community life.”⁷⁹ It is the insiders of the community who are urged to restore these exiles and welcome them back.

Because sharing food and drink is so basic to hospitality, it leads naturally into the sacramental aspects of life. In a rural community this primarily involves the land. Robert Banks writes “the spiritual health of those who belong to the church is linked to their appreciation of the land and their understanding of its built-in rhythms, processes and sacramental character.”⁸⁰ Land is primarily intended for the production of food which in itself is sacramental. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances were connected to food—in particular with eating. There is a great need to relearn the art of eating to live, and not living to eat. Eating, as one of the ordinary acts of life, becomes for us a sacramental reality if we allow in God’s presence. The day by day preparation of meals is love offered to others. In eating together the presence of God is experienced in a real way, for in the breaking of bread, friendships become richer and deeper.

Celebration

The farm community tends to elaborately celebrate weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays. Secondary to this but perhaps as important is the funeral where the whole community gets together to remember and celebrate the life of a deceased person. The realization of the complexity of the inter-relatedness of families within the community becomes vividly apparent at such a time. But without recognition of the Lord in our life, celebration can be a great counterfeit “partying” leaving people feeling empty and dissatisfied. We engage in celebration when we