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## Pastoring in the Small Community

Martin Wixson

### *Introduction*

I was born and raised in a small farming community and have lived most of my adult life in small communities. This fact, coupled with roughly ten years' experience pastoring in small towns, as well as preaching on a "fill-in" status, gives me a basis for this article. The small community has a general capacity to be friendly and cool, open and closed, emotionally healthy and dysfunctional, conservative and liberal, supportive and judgmental, and religious yet extremely irreligious. Whereas on the one hand they represent the ideal lifestyle, on the other hand they represent all of the dirty little secrets about which one reads in dime novels. These dichotomies are expected and prevalent in cities and suburbs; the small town is generally viewed as *the* place to live, raise your children, and is portrayed as the end goal of living happily ever after. Of course, there is merit in choosing to raise your children in the small town and in living out quiet days in peace, but most people have been impressed with a Hollywood version of small town living.

The small town also has individual idiosyncrasies, which this article will address. Coming from an experiential viewpoint, as well as a pastoral viewpoint, I hope to shed some light on the many facets of pastoring in the small community. The pastor sees things the average townsfolk do not see, and he/she hears and experiences small-town life from a different position than the average citizen. Small town living can be the most wonderful experience in life, and at the same time, or at some time in that

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existence, it can be the single-most devastating experience in life. It is unlike life in a large community where one can choose friends and acquaintances from among the multitude; where one can choose to be or not to be involved in the neighborhood; where one can discover new philosophy or religion without fear of ostracization. Rather, the small community is intricately interwoven into the fabric and soul of the people living in its midst. Most of the people are related to each other, even if only in shirttail fashion. Many of the communities simply will not run properly if it is filled with mavericks who refuse to conform to the cultural norm of the area. It is a culture in which parents and children can be welcomed or shunned – much to their dismay – when in fact they simply, and innocently, want to be a part of the community. In many small towns the newcomer is “sized up” within the first few days of arrival. The lady who married into a large family in one town we pastored was considered an “outsider” for the entire thirty-eight years of their life together. They have recently moved to her home state and begun a new life together. So it is, that in the small town there exists an “us and them” underlying current, with “them” being the definitive minority. “Them” are the ones who think independently of the others; the ones who are forward thinking; the ones who would dare to bring needed change to the town. They are the professional people whose positions experience rapid and unceasing turnover in the small communities of America, and perhaps the world.

Yet, the small town can be a wonderful place to bring stability to a family needing to establish a solid foundation for children. Lifelong relationships are built in small towns. Intimacy between neighbors that is not possible in large communities is a natural outgrowth of the lifestyle. If one needs to talk to someone about a problem, there is always someone to accommodate the situation. The listener may have genuine concern, but also seeks after something to take his or her mind off the mundane of the small town. If it does not bother you that the greater part of the town knows the details of your life, then you have instant therapy free of charge. Many will share their insight and opinions unsolicited. Truly, one is never alone in the small town, as one is alone in the midst of the multitude of the larger community.

All of the aforementioned is the crux of this article. How do these things effect the workings of the church? How should the

pastor view them, and how do these things determine his conduct? Pastoring in a small community can be very gratifying at its best, and very frustrating at its worst. The pastor and his family, for better or worse, live in a glass house. There are individuals in small towns who make it their business to know everything about the clergypersons of the community, and to broadcast their findings. So, the pastor has a choice: He/she can determine to live as an unblemished example of Christ-likeness to the best of one's ability, or just be him or herself with all of the faults and vices unbecoming of a Christian leader. The latter speaks of the incongruence of the position, and leads to mockery and scorn of Christianity and "lazy preachers." The former speaks to the wonderful testimony that comes from living as Jesus would live in a community fraught with its problems, yet being loving and accepting of others while at the same time a teacher—a living example—who holds others accountable for their actions.

I was born and raised one mile outside of the village limits of a tiny town in the "Thumb" of Michigan. There were approximately 250 people in the town, which served the township and the surrounding small farms. It had one small grocery, two gas stations, a post office, a bar, a firehouse, an elementary school, a tiny one-pumper cement mixing plant, a soda fountain café, a funeral parlor, a pallet making lumber yard, a state highway department substation, a barbershop, a Methodist Church, a small machine shop, a grain elevator, and a community building. There was no mayor, city council, or articles of incorporation. My Junior High School and Senior High School were both ten miles distant in another small town of approximately 4,000 souls.

This community was interrelated through marriage and activity, death and birth, divorce and extramarital affair, and the need for cooperation to perpetuate life. That life centered around the school, the barbershop, the post office, the grain elevator, and the other public gathering places. The community hall was host to many weddings and community gatherings including annual family reunions, fundraisers, and women's clubs. One was involved. A newcomer became involved or faced judgment as "stand-offish," or snobbish.

I left the area at eighteen years of age and thrust myself into the big city culture of Southern California. Much to my shock, nobody cared who his neighbor was and no one stood around

the barbershop talking. No one cared about the fire down the street, or the death of a child in a city of thousands. All was centered on satisfying self. Although I did not like the small town nosiness, this was terrible! It was the complete opposite of all that I knew. So, armed with a wife and two small children, I headed for the wilds of Montana. It had the caring small-town feel, yet was individualistic enough in culture to satisfy my need for independence. It was in western Montana that I felt the call to the pastorate.

My first pastorate was in a town of 500 people, the center of the county, and almost identical to the community in which I was raised. Again, all were somehow related to each other. This was eerily like my childhood. Weddings, funerals, births, accidents, tragedies, farming, two gas stations, etc. I (we) pastored three years in that community, and we have many fond memories. Still, there were those hurtful times that I had grown accustomed to be without in the more individualistic culture. We moved from there to Southeast Alaska, to an island of approximately 4,000 people. The town was similar to the community in which I attended High School. It was individualistic, but still heavily collectivist in influence and bias. This was my second pastorate.

The experiences, the comparisons between a collective society and an individualistic society, and the ties of family to community—the sociopolitical interplay—became more understandable as I matured in my own age, mentality, and experience. These experiences and understandings did not change the facts of small town life, nor did they change the position of pastor to community in its relational existence. However, the understanding is a great help to anyone contemplating moving to a small town or pastoring a small town. Unlike a large city, the small town has its own way of doing things. It behooves the individual considering such a move to take note of the things shared in this article.

Pastoring is *the raw edge of life*, the cutting surface, for healing and for sharing the intimacies of people. Things hidden. Things secret. Things scarred. They (small town folk) love you for your compassion, concern, and help, and hate you for what you know about them. Most other professions deal with issues: the lawyer, the judge, the doctor, the psychiatrist, the teacher. But the pastor is to be a confidant and a counselor. He or she is to tap the spirit

of a person and to see things that only God can know. The pastor is the one individual in the community with whom one can share the darkness. This is a threat to many in the small town. Sharing intimate details about the neighbor is the norm and it is falsely assumed the pastor will do the same; that he will tell all to the first person who comes by his office. The pastor is also a friend, unlike the other professionals of the community, or so it is believed. The pastor must stand alone against misinformed, maligned, and mistaken attitudes, for not only is he/she held in moderate to high esteem, but also in contempt at the same time. It has nothing to do with what the pastor knows about issues such as law, or physical ailments, or how a child is doing in school, but rather a person's spirit. And *that* is none of anyone's business. It is too close. Even the other professionals of the community hold the pastor at arm's length. Yet, it is the very reason for the pastor's existence. Somehow small town people understand this even better than pastors. They simply cannot put it into words. As I plumb some of the depths of small town pastoring, my hope is that others will gain valuable insight into the most important profession in the world—that of a pastor—and how it fits into the fabric of a small town.

I will share some of the comical and not-so-comical experiences in small town pastoring, but will change names and some of the details to protect the identities of individuals. Some topics of discussion will include the importance of history, and the structure of the political element. Also, social ills will be addressed as they affect the entire community. Finally, how all of these peculiarities affect the running, or administering, of the local congregation will be considered.

#### *The Political Structure*

In any small town, or community, it must be remembered that familial ties are interwoven into the fabric of the political process. Honesty, integrity, and the host of virtues that commonly make up the desirable characteristics of political candidates may or may not be taken into consideration when the voting booth is operating. In the small community in which I was raised, the political candidates were divided along religious lines. If the candidate was Catholic, his win was determined by the number of Catholic voters that went to the polls. If the candidate was Protestant, his election was secured as long as he or

she was not considered an outsider in the community. This was a simple process, and easily understood, since Catholics and Protestants did not intermarry. The swing vote rested on the Polish members of the community. They were Catholic but outsiders, even within the Catholic community, because the Catholic community was Irish in majority and Poles were considered low-class citizens. No respectable Irish would marry a Pole *even if* he or she was Catholic. No respectable Protestant would marry a Pole because he or she *was* Catholic. There was no racial element. (Other races were not welcomed, and in fact, those who attempted to move to the area were harassed mercilessly until they left). These elected positions were for township and school officials who decided school issues and set the taxation for landowners. Taxation rates were always open to dispute because one family or another seemed to receive certain favors and tax breaks. Assessments were frequently out of adjustment until the next election, when another person was elected that would not be influenced as heavily by family members. Sometimes the books were refused to those who wished to view the records. Did anyone sue? No. But this was the climate (moderately tense) at all times.

In the small incorporated community city government must be taken into consideration. The council is made up of several high profile members of the town, no different than in the large city, but now the family and business element is a part of the equation. Ownership is the key ingredient here. If the candidate "owns" his family, and if the candidate "owns" key community members, then his election is assured. In each segment of society there are people who have pull within their circle of friends. The person who "owns" these individuals gains favor by pulling strings for a job, forgiving a debt, helping with a bill, sending the children gifts, etc. These individuals then go to their family and friends to "campaign" on behalf of the great guy that helped them. This will have nothing to do with the candidate's qualifications or character, and is a common dilemma in any political arena, but is exacerbated ten-fold in the small town.

The public works department takes care of trash pickup, water, sewer, street repairs, lighting, sidewalk maintenance, enforcing building codes, and the like. Typically, any labor position within this department is gained through a human system of family and friends. In other words, it's who you know. That is how employment is secured. This poses problems for the city

manager who is normally hired from outside the community. He is at the mercy of the maintenance supervisor and the workers. He will step on toes to his own demise if he dares to implement changes in public works department procedures. Word of his assumed "incompetence" will be spread throughout the community, and city council, until he must resign or be fired.

High offices such as judge, D.A., and mayor are also a part of the family structure in the small community. As a rule, the judge is a magistrate who is related to one of the prominent members of the town and whose family owns one of the more prosperous businesses. So it is with the mayor. It is common for the mayor to be the mother or father of the D.A., married into the largest and wealthiest family in the town, an owner of a major business, and have any number of individuals related by shirt-tail sitting on the town council. The D.A. is usually from a large family, possibly married into either the magistrate's or mayor's family, and voted into office in the same manner as the others. And so it goes.

The police officers, sometimes with the exception of chief but not always, are normally individuals from the community who have had one or two classes in law enforcement. The chief is sometimes appointed by the city council, and sometimes voted into office, depending on the town charter. As one can readily understand, the city council, public works, high offices, and police are intricately interwoven. This is where the "good ole boys club" takes form at the public level. In one town I pastored, the high school students sold tickets to an annual "kegger" held two miles north of town. They sold them to any high school student, and offered them to some of the teachers. Of course, the students would drive their own cars and pickups to this location well known for its illicit activities. When I approached the police chief about this matter, he simply replied, "Look, this way I know where those kids are at. I will check up on them every hour to make sure everything is ok." Then he told me off the record that he was retiring soon, that he had come from the east coast to live in a quiet little western town, and he was not about to upset the status quo. When a major newspaper carried the story about the party, complete with pictures of kids, beer, bonfire, and police, the townsfolk were in an uproar because "those city people are making us out to look like hicks." In many ways, it was comical, and seemed straight out of the "Dukes of Hazzard." No amount



of admonition would sequester support from the Christian portion of the community to put a stop to this illegal, and dangerous, annual event. They, too, thought it was rather cute and were some of the most vocal against the newspaper article. They did not make the mental connection that the newspaper had no hand in making them look like hicks who defied the law. The paper simply reported the news, the police chief hastened his retirement, and the town voted in one of his deputies as the new police chief. The deputy had been in attendance at the party, was known to have poached an elk or two during hunting season, helped fix little "problems" among friends, and was part of the largest family in the county. The D.A. was related by marriage, the magistrate was a cousin, and the mayor was an aunt.

Before delving into the subject of public institutions, it must be understood there are no secrets in the small town. The only secrets are those not given to the general public outside of the community. This is the reason for the distress over the newspaper article mentioned above. There are things not openly discussed at large gatherings within the community, but are regularly made a topic at any small gathering. Of course, everyone feigns innocence if approached for a confession of talking about "me." Every member of the small town knows instinctively that others are talking about them. The culture dictates prudence that one is careful never to admit to such behavior, 'though it is understood to be a part of the social makeup. It can be maddening to have no secrets. Some things should be left between you and God. If you and your wife or some member of your family is having a quarrel, or you are depressed about an issue, and you do not want anyone to know, then settle the issue before you walk out the door. If you don't, then it will be a matter of hours before the whole town knows. One cannot keep things bottled up inside for any length of time, therefore, you will tell someone "in confidence" of your personal problem. Happily, this can have a therapeutic effect on your relationship, or your mental dilemma, or whatever the case may be. In the small town, when the information is out and there are no secrets, there are many voices of condolence and advice. No more secrets, no more problem. There are many open doors for venting your feelings because everyone understands. They have heard this before in detail, but will never admit they heard it from the neighbor or your very close friend. This can be a very comical sequence of events as one

person is attentively listening with empathy to the outpouring of the heart of another, all the while fully aware of the whole story without letting the other know of this pre-disclosed knowledge. Yet, it can also be very hurtful when this gossiping activity is brought out into the open. I do not want to get ahead of myself, but there are two stories that must be brought out here to illustrate this problem and to preclude the topic of the public institution.

The first illustration is in regard to a gentleman in whom the doctor had discovered colon cancer requiring a colostomy. In the process of testing and surgery several days had passed. Each church has a prayer chain, which I often referred to as a gossip line much to the dismay of anyone who was involved with the chain. As an aside, to this day I hold a contemptible view of the prayer chain system. As prayer chains go, they are nothing more than an opportunity to indulge a bit of gossip under the guise of concerned Christianity. This particular case was no different; I was accosted in the middle of the street by a woman known to be one of the worst gossips in town. She said, "I understand Bill has to wear a bag!" Stunned, knowing this woman wanted me to fill in the details, and she *not* being a part of our congregation, I simply told her that I was not in a position to divulge any personal and private information. She should call the family if she wanted to know. At first it seemed as though I had slapped her, but she immediately recovered her composure to inform me that she had no intention of prying and certainly "did not want to give that appearance" (too late for that cover-up).

Knowing the information must have originated with close friends, and probably our own ladies group (they were the only ones who knew at that time), I approached the ladies to admonish them to be extremely cautious with any information freely given to others who would use it to gossip. I told them what happened to me on the street with this known gossip, explained I understood the fact that people will talk, and I was disappointed to learn that it came from our own people. We should not hurt our own. One of our own had been hurt by the total disregard of privacy and personal embarrassing medical issues. Again, it appeared as though I had slapped someone, only this time it was my own ladies group. As to their reaction, they simply stated that I would be the last to know what was happening in the community—and I was. I lost that skirmish, and the hurt indi-

viduals remained close friends with the ones spreading the gossip. Although the hurt party was supportive of the admonition at first, it soon became apparent that they would rather I had not brought it up. The subject matter only forced into the open the issue of someone talking behind someone else's back, which is never to be admitted. There are no secrets in the small town. They resent anyone making the attempt to change this process, and they don't really care how explicit the Bible is on the subject. I am only now beginning to understand gossip as a part of caring in the mind of the small community member. If they didn't care, they wouldn't talk about it. Simple. A little twisting of the intent of Scripture perhaps, but that is how they understand it.

Armed with this insight, I now will give to the reader the second illustration. There are certain individuals in each small town who take it upon themselves to know what current events are taking place. This means they literally watch the neighbors with the intention of reporting what they see. One lady would drive around town several times each morning, sometimes beginning before dawn. In this manner, everyone knew who was out all night, up all night, in the arms of another all night, leaving the house at odd hours of the night, etc. Then before midnight, she would make her tour of the town to see who was visiting who, what teenager was parked along the road with a date, etc., etc., etc. Since everyone was aware of the vehicle each other owned, this made educated guesses quite accurate as to what was going on behind certain doors. Not that any of this would stand in court, nevertheless, in the mind of most it could be very incriminating. According to Applebaum & Chambliss (1997), there are several factors that are involved with the makeup of gossip and rumors. Prejudices and preconceived notions about individuals or classes of people tend to effect the interpretation of events in a given situation. "...the degree of alteration varies according to the nature of the rumor; it is greatest for rumors that trigger strong emotions or that pass through a large number of people....Rumors, like panics, may result from fears that stem from the loss of control over many aspects of one's life..." (p.592).

I had received a call from a woman who was having marital problems and wanted to stop by the church for counsel. This woman was known as a flirt and rather loose at times, and had a reputation for being instrumental in the breakup of a couple of

local marriages. I agreed to see her in the church sanctuary. My wife and I counseled women as a team and this was no exception. She pulled up in front of the church about the time the “cruiser” was making her rounds. As we (my wife, myself, and the counselee) stood in the dark foyer of the church watching as we visited, the cruiser circled once every ten minutes or so. At first the cruising gossip was making a vain attempt at being unobtrusive, but as time passed, and more circuits were made, her head began to crane and the eye began to strain to see *what was going on inside that church!* Of course, my wife and I were well-aware by now of the “system” running the town, and were quite amused at the bold attempt to gain something of juicy interest to the rest of the community. After our counseling session, I asked my wife how long it would be before we had feedback from someone that knew we were counseling this wayward woman. To our surprise (much sooner than I expected), I received a call from a deacon’s wife in obvious distress within two hours. She told me the woman had been seen at the church, wanted to know if I was counseling her, told me not to counsel her, that she would attempt to seduce me, and on and on. I told her my wife is always at my side when counseling women and that we were aware of her history. I appreciated the concern, but there was no way I was going to refuse counsel to one who asked, no matter who it might be. Somehow our relationship with the deacon and his wife was no longer the same after that. Perhaps it was because I would not be intimidated into abiding by the “code” set up by others. Or perhaps I was viewed as disobedient to a deacon’s wife by a deacon who clearly desired control of the congregation and pastor. Loss of control? Nature of the rumor? Strong emotional trigger? Whatever the case, our relationship was cool at best until we resigned that pastorate.

The reader may be questioning the connection between these incidents and the public institution. Understand that nothing is secret nor sacred in the small town, and you will understand the workings of the local hospital—a public institution. The doctor has more hands-on dealings with people in a physical sense, and sometimes psychological, than any other single person in town. He may be an outsider, he may have married into a local family, or he may even be a hometown boy (or girl) who has returned to his roots. The nurse is usually a local woman. This truth speaks to the issue of privacy in the medical field. If one wishes to retain

an element of privacy regarding medical issues, he or she must go to another community far away from any local connections. Your very private session with the doctor can, and likely will, be public knowledge within a few very short days depending upon the seriousness of your malady. The more serious the illness, the sooner the news will hit the streets. If he doesn't spill information, the nurse certainly will.

Then there is the school. Most teachers will be from outside the community, but the school board is made up of locals. As you can by now imagine, rules are made and broken by the whim of the board member. If the board member has an unruly child, the teacher is either blamed or not allowed to discipline as he or she would another child. As a result, many incidents of disruption in the class are caused by children of prominent members of the community, such as the case of three students hanging the math teacher out of the second story window of the high school by his heels. This type of unruly behavior is also typical in larger communities, however, the larger community has many families and board members who will not condone outlandish behavior from others, and will adhere to the established rules. Whereas, in the small town the rules will bend because all the board members are related, "owned" by others, etc., as previously discussed. The resultant effect is the teacher, and principal, have no teeth for implementing correction. In fact, many school superintendents are elected from the area—family again—which means he or she will automatically overrule the teacher and principal in favor of maintaining the "status quo." As for those three students—the incident went down in town history as legendary behavior that was frequently discussed, and laughed about, among the locals. (Those boys really showed him!) More than one teacher had a nervous breakdown and was considered a weak individual deserving of bad treatment.

The school is a major institution of social interaction in the small town. The larger the community, the less importance it carries. School plays, sports, intercommunity events, and the like, are the center of activity for many small towns. There typically are no other outlets for energy such as bowling, theater, movie house, etc., normally found in larger cities. Also, the school has the largest facility for community-wide gatherings. It becomes the civic center for any major event. One could be very uncomfortable at a meeting of the community if he or she is con-

sidered as someone who seeks to bring change to a system that has been working for over 100 years. Small town folks do not like change. That's why they are small town folks, and until the newcomer understands and accepts this truth he or she will chafe under their system.

I have omitted any discussion of the local barbershop here for the simple reason that it is common knowledge the barber shop is well-known as an institution for the disbursement of information about members of the community. Therefore, the post office will be the next topic of discussion. The post office is a gathering place to socialize on a small scale. Most people know when the postmaster has sorted the mail, and will migrate to that facility at that time. If one wishes to see a person, or needs to speak to them but cannot make contact through the telephone, all one needs to do is wait at the post office. The postmaster can tell you when that individual usually arrives and you can plan accordingly. It is also a common practice for the postal worker to know what type of correspondence the townsfolk are receiving. Again, in larger cities most postal workers have too much work to spend time perusing the mail going through the facility. However, in the small community there is not the volume of mail to warrant "full steam" work except during the holiday season. Other than answering the telephone, or attending to the few regular patrons, there is not much activity at the local post office. Occasion is given to the workers to know when the bank is to foreclose on your farm loan, or when a lawyer is serving papers to a single parent in a custody battle for the children. On vacation? Send a post card and half the town will know about your trip before the recipient receives the card. There are serious consequences for the postal worker who indulges in this form of activity, but for some the risks are worth the juicy knowledge one can gain about the area people. It is simply irresistible to some folks.

Word quickly spreads throughout the business community about a person's character, personality, likes and dislikes, habits, etc. For instance, the bank knows your financial status. Keeping your bank balance solvent and paying your loans promptly will enhance your reputation for being a responsible individual who understands priorities. I distinctly remember being told while paying an outstanding bill as the new pastor in the community, that I was "sure different than the last guy that was here." That

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last guy had been the pastor for over six years and the storeowner wouldn't even call him by name. He assumed all preachers were the same and he, along with the entire business community, gave me a very cool reception wherever I went until it became clear I was not slothful in my responsibilities. Nevertheless, it took three months to overcome the bad feelings toward the position of pastor.

The physician, as briefly mentioned in previous pages, knows all the intimate details of the physical, and sometimes mental, nuances of each person in town or county. He or she seems to garner much more support from the town and holds a unique position in correlation with the area. Similar to the local mortician, the doctor does a job that most would not do and, therefore, is respected although he may not be well liked. The doctor is educated, saves lives, and gets his hands dirty. He knows some of a person's secrets without getting too close. He does not have to know why a person has a certain quirkiness, he only needs to fix the physical problems resulting from the quirkiness. Of all professions, the doctor is granted the most tolerance for his differences with the community. Teachers and preachers come and go, company executives may come and go, business people may come and go. But the doctor is tolerated far beyond the measure given to others. The exception to this is the doctor who has caused problems to the extent of a lawsuit, for instance. He may as well leave town. Win or lose, he loses for very few will support him. Yet, the relationship he has with the town rarely ever deteriorates to that degree. In most small towns that type of deterioration in the relationship between the community and the doctor is such a rare occurrence I personally have never heard of it happening. There have been gross abuses ranging from neglect of patients, to gross misapplication of drugs, to prescription abuse, to sexual molestation—all perpetrated by the local doctor—and a host of other abuses that would destroy the career of a person in any other position. Yet, the doctor is tolerated. Most townsfolk living in the hinterlands of our country consider they are fortunate to have any kind of doctor regardless of the level of competence.

The merchants of a small community have their own style of interaction with each other apart from, and sometimes above, the rest of the community. They are rarely an outsider, and they may have many interpersonal connections in which they communi-

cate on an ordinary basis, but among themselves it is a special relationship. The businessperson in the small town belongs to a type of guild. Only the most forward thinking and outward thinking individual in business can remain cordial to those who would dare go to the "big city" to buy goods at a cheaper price. Remember, nothing goes on in the small town unless someone else knows all the details. "Where did the neighbor get that new mower?" "I see new drapes in the windows! They didn't get them in this town, or in my store." And so on. If a person wants to remain on good terms with the whole of the community, he or she will use much discretion when buying out-of-town goods and services. If you spend money in their town, you become one with them (to a certain degree), and have an audience when you speak up at the town meeting.

Finally, in the political structure of the small town there remains the "other" category, which consists of public services, service groups, secret societies, and the religious community. These are called by various names such as Human Services Advisory Council, Rotary Club, Elks or perhaps the Masonic Lodge, and the local Ministerial Association. All persons are unofficially expected to belong to one or more of these publicly oriented groups. Those who refuse to belong, out of personal choice, are viewed as somewhat deviant and unaccepting of the local populace and their way of life. This is aside from whether the person is an outsider or not. An outsider can be welcomed and an outsider, or the outsider can be unwelcome and an outsider—the choice is his or hers. So it is better to be welcomed as an outsider. This is limiting in how much an individual can ever be one with the community, and there are exceptions, but the only option is to be the unwanted outsider. A deacon's wife told my wife that she would always be an outsider, not accepted into the community as one of them, even if we were in the pastorate of the local congregation for over ten years. So, "you might as well resign yourself to that fact." She was probably trying to be helpful, but those words rang true when, down the road, there were some problems in the church needing correcting. Although I was the president of the corporation, I was not one of them, and, therefore, had no say in the correction. In fact, I was told to come down off my mountain and worship with the people. We had been there almost three years giving of our lives and living in a "glass house." This is a good illustration of being unwelcome



and an outsider. Regardless, the person viewed as an outsider will reap some reward by personal involvement in at least one of the local organizations.

*The Social Structure*

There are three basic divisions of cultural blend within the small community that determine much of the process in decision-making, and shed some light on why some small communities can be of the extreme in one direction. These three divisions are *collectivist*, *individualist*, and what I refer to as *'archal*. It must be pointed out, here, that mass communications and mobility have effected the cultures in many communities by causing an overlapping of these cultural distinctions. However, it remains that "Interacting effectively with peers from different cultures, ethnic groups, social classes, and historical backgrounds does not come naturally" (Stewart, p.487). Most regions and small towns have learned how to mix these divisions together to successfully manage life and relationships. In the town in which I was raised it was common to consider the consequences individual actions would have on the community as a whole, be it good or bad, detrimental or complimentary of all. Yet, still the individual would bear responsibility for wrong or right, which would reflect on him or her alone. In other words, the town was made of individuals who could be good or bad. It mattered not what family you were a part of—if you were wrong, then you were wrong. Simple. His or her actions may have looked bad for the community, but the person in the wrong bore the ultimate responsibility. In this way, the pressure to abandon individual identity in favor of total collectivism was eliminated. As mentioned earlier, the political process was not necessarily affected by individual wrongdoing unless a person was too far out of line. Then he or she was not welcome in community functions even though they were born and raised in the area. An example of this is with a woman who came from a family that was considered wild and undisciplined. She had a reputation of being loose with men and eventually maintained a live-in relationship with a black man for over forty years. It was not acceptable to have an interracial relationship, which unfairly contributed to her sour reputation, and it was certainly out of the question to marry a black person. This couple was obviously in love with each other in a no-win situation, but they stepped too far out of line for the community to

accept. They lived three miles from town but never went there for any purpose. All business was conducted in another town in which they were either accepted or unknown. This was the only exception to the rule of racial separation in my town. They were not harassed, but shunned, and made to feel the lack of acceptance by the community. Any who dared befriend this couple were labeled as equal to white trash.

With this example in mind, the collectivist culture is alive and well in the small town of single-minded America. Each community has its own set of unspoken rules, by which it lives and breathes. Unlike the larger community, or city, which is quite lenient in view of the quirks and habits of others, the small town has certain expectations of its members. Granted, the large city does have its way of communicating its displeasure of unacceptable behavior in others, however, for the most part one can expect to find indifference or tolerance of unusual habits found in the neighborhood. In the small community there are behaviors that are not acceptable, which happen to be acceptable in the large community, and acceptable behaviors in the small community that would not be tolerated in the large community. For instance, fads and fashions are begun in the city. Those fads and fashions are slow to take hold in the small town, and anyone who would dye their hair green or wear pants hanging down to their knees without first seeing it in the cities for at least two years would be in for a difficult time with relationships and respect. On the other hand, drunkenness and drug dealing are strangely tolerated in the small town, whereas, those individuals are reported to the police in the cities. This is in direct relationship to the familial atmosphere of the small town. Don't embarrass them with outlandish hairstyles and clothing, but sins are acceptable because all have "problems."

In one small town in which I pastored, the native portion of the community was rife with drunkenness, drug abuse, and incest. It was not something of which they were proud, but that is the way it was. If the law convicted a person of a crime surrounding one of these issues the whole native community would rally to the side of the guilty and his/her family. The lawmakers simply did not understand that "uncle" had a problem he could not help. Interestingly, the balance of the town leaned toward sympathizing with the convicted member and family. It was a part of the standard; this was family. The vice was a way of life

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and someone was interfering with it. Here again is the concept of change not being welcomed. The family member would serve some jail time, and then be released to the custody of the family who perpetrated, and promoted, this behavior—including the incestuous cases.

Then there is the individualist culture in which each person is free to do as he or she sees fit. The United States and Canada are largely known for this type of culture. There is an independent spirit that drives individuals to satisfy personal wishes and accomplishments without much regard for the betterment of the whole community or family. Although this is not necessarily right or wrong, there are gradual changes taking place in the direction of a more collectivist form of social interaction with the advent of global concerns and communications.

The small town usually has an element that dictates pride in being out of the mainstream of American life. That is, when it comes to changing ideas, and making adjustments in work to match new technology, they will only do so begrudgingly. Most small town people are fiercely loyal to systems established by their forefathers; they are *not* going to be told what to do and woe to the person who would dare suggest change. There is a defiance inherent in them that is reminiscent of the conquering hordes that migrated west, or of those who led our American Revolution. As an example of the struggle against change, one small town in which I pastored saw no need to install upgraded electronic equipment in the schools, or computers, until forced to do so by society in general. They were not proactive, nor were they progressive unless pushed by circumstances beyond their control. This same mentality held true for their contempt of the law. Many ranchers and farmers made decisions based on their need with total disregard for legislation. Eagles preying upon their sheep were predators, and were dealt with as predators. Ranchers made no apologies and generally viewed game officials with contempt. If someone wanted to dig a well, he dug a well. Water rights meant nothing to him. I had one deacon threaten to shoot a government official if he set one foot on the deacon's property, then bragged about it all over town. *And* he got away with it! His outward display of contempt was met with much approval. These types of defiance are generally not found in cities. They are not tolerated. I remember one man telling me that the neighbors regularly shot elk out of season, illegally, if they

grazed on the wheat fields. If I was in the right place at the right time, I might benefit from this activity by receiving some fresh meat. I informed that individual that if I heard of this, and could prove it, I would turn the man in to the authorities. His reasoning was that if the state owned the elk then they should control the elk, and not allow them to eat the farmer's wheat. Since the state or federal government refused to control the elk, then the farmers had that right. I disagreed and lost the support of this man. Was I wrong? No. I would take the same position today, but it points out the fact that some people are not adaptable to living in some small towns. Surely this bit of information about me was given to the perpetrators of this activity and, as a result, I lost any opportunity to reach these individuals with the gospel, along with seriously damaging my rapport with the Christian community who supported the farmer. So, we see that many communities are collectively individualistic.

The third element of this cultural blend that must be reckoned with in the small community is what I call the 'archal element. By this I mean patriarchal and matriarchal. It is probably safe to say that most Euro-Americans understand the traditional structure of family in which the father is the head of the family. Responsibility and final authority rests with the father. Ideally, this is a good system when managed properly. As long as the man's will and wishes are not selfishly motivated he will not make decisions outside of the expressed desires of his wife. His authority will be based in the accomplishment of good for all parties in the family. Truly, this is a good example of small-scale collectivism at work.

With this thought in mind, it is well to note there are communities that tip the scale of collective balance one direction or another. The strict patriarchal society believes the woman's place is in the home or only in a position of which the man allows, given certain extenuating circumstances. As an example, one town in which I pastored held the traditional woman-in-the-home position that relegated the woman to cooking for the men's work crew, sewing, cleaning, having children, etc. The man made the decisions for the family, sometimes with little or no discussion, and became a literal dictator. The general feeling among the populace of the area was that if the woman could not handle the terms of marriage, she was free to leave—the burden of guilt for the marriage's failure was her responsibility. It was rare to see a

man doing the grocery shopping. Likewise, it was rare to see a woman handling the giant farming equipment in the fields. Of course, this is not news to the liberated woman and the enlightened society of today. However, there are many "traditional" households in America that make up entire communities, and those communities expect each others' values to reflect their cultural norm. Woe be to the newcomer who violates this unwritten code of conduct! Typical of some of the comments of the local population would be: "Well, they are different." "He clearly does not wear the pants in his family." "Who does she think she is? She is mighty uppity." As a result, the unaware couple is ostracized, disrespected, and judged; they are left to wonder why they do not have many friends and are not included in community events. As a pastoral entity in the community, the ministering couple must make a concerted effort to acculturate themselves into the new small town in which they pastor. It behooves them to consider the possibility that they will not be able to tolerate the cultural norms of the community they aspire to reach. Sometimes the norms fly in the face of solid Biblical teaching and most often the people do not want to adjust their thinking to the ways of God. They would rather keep their traditions of men in much the same manner as those in the Bible that Jesus confronted in Matthew 15 and Mark 7 (to name just a couple of references). This can be an extreme cultural shock to the newly wed couple who has a romanticized view of pastoring in a quaint little town when they are fresh out of seminary.

The opposite end of the balance involves the matriarchal society. Men are viewed as the weaker party in marriage or interpersonal relationships. They are frequently seen as unable to make decisions favorable to all members of the group, be it family or community. They are also seen as often taken with lusts and passions due to a lack of good judgment. Gender joking now takes the form of male belittling rather than the opposite female belittling. Decisions for the family, and community in general, are the responsibility of the matriarch of the family. This would be the oldest and most respected member of the group. For community decisions, the most respected members of family groups are consulted.

This poses a serious problem different than the patriarchal system. Now the testosterone induced male aggressiveness has no natural outlet. The males of the community now are prone to

beating their wives, staying away from the home for days at a time, carousing with other females, and becoming involved in a wide array of substance abuses. In short, the community who has a large population with this system will find the male population in a state of demoralization. Their reason-for-being is valued only for making babies and bringing home some form of sustenance. As a result, they gravitate toward mischief. Since there is no satisfaction in attempting to accomplish a worthwhile endeavor (they do not have the mental capacity according to the women in their lives), they simply give up trying. Couple this with the total upheaval of their original way of life, as in some of the American Native population, and we have the makings of indifference, cynicism, and non-contributing members of society.

As can be seen here, extreme male dominance and extreme female dominance are both out of balance for a healthy society. Of course, the variable in this scenario involves the characteristic of the male. Whereas a woman will be somewhat more passive in her position in a patriarchal system, a man will be passive aggressive in a matriarchal system. One town I pastored had a large Native population that was matriarchal. The men did a great deal of coffee drinking and gossiping, and seemingly abandoned their families for reasons unknown. They displayed much irresponsibility, and were undependable and non-committal to things of obvious importance. Here again, the attempt to reverse and bring balance to this system will only generate frustration for the serious student of the Biblical-social order in which Jesus clearly valued the individual and gender contributions to our world. To preach at them, and try to teach them or admonish them, only drives the wedge of separation deeper; they now will no longer sit with you, and have little to say 'though a male pastor is attempting to communicate with the men. The pastor has displayed his ignorance of cultural differences and has no insight that he has done so. His attitude towards the men of this system degenerates to a feeling that they are worthless, shiftless, and deserving of the treatment they receive. This is unfortunate because he must reach them where they are, on their level. Don't try to rearrange their culture, just teach them about Jesus and make them better as they are—without the vices, the carousing, and the fits of uncontrollable behavior.

This puts the pastor's wife in a precarious position. She must

not portray a position of subservience to her pastor husband or of dominance over him, but rather, a position of authority and decisiveness on her own merit while being an example of a Biblical role model. In this way, balance is modeled for the community without an overweening power play by either pastor or wife.

Along with the cultural blend, there are regional considerations that determine how one may communicate and interact with the neighbors. For instance, the Midwest of America is known for its stoic and bullheaded refusal to conform to changes in our society in general. The Southeast is known for being red-necked, ignorant, backwoodsy, etc. The Northwest is liberal. The Southwest is self-indulgent, and the South-central area is conservative. The Northeast is self-sufficient, and the Eastern Seaboard is expressive. Of course, all of these stereotypes are ever changing depending on the year and the person to whom one is speaking regarding these areas. Some towns are known for their lawlessness, while others are known for their safety and family activities.

Without diverting to a discussion of migratory patterns of the masses, which accounts for some of these differences, there is a need here to consider structural interplay within the small community. The overall mindset of the community may be determined, in generalities, by the region of its setting. A good example of this is a comparison of the three small towns which I have referred in this article. First, in the town where I grew up in the upper Midwest, extramarital affairs usually ended in divorce. It was unacceptable behavior that tainted the reputations of both parties involved. Second, in the first town I pastored in the northern western United States, divorce was not welcomed, but taken as a fact of life. The parties remained at least partially involved in the community, albeit under tense conditions, and their reputations were none the worse for wear. Third, in the second church I pastored in the extreme Northwest, divorce was not only accepted, but it was a regular occurrence. The individuals would take up with someone else, continue to live in the same small town, attend the school functions and other community events they always had, and even participate in local concerns with new spouses. They often all remained friends. As one can readily see, the further to the west and north in geographic area, the more liberal the views toward divorce and the more accepting of unbecoming behavior. This example is a *general*

view of the regional mores one may encounter and may not be unequivocal or absolute, as there are always exceptions to any rule. The idea here is to point out the cultural differences one may encounter that are directly related to geographic settings.

I briefly touched upon the ingroup/outgroup concept earlier, but it bears repeating that more often than not outsiders remain outsiders. The exception to this rule is found in the small community that experiences a large turnover in its population on a regular basis such as the bedroom community of the western United States, or the town that has a government agency that supports the economy. State prisons are known for sustaining a community financially, but have a regular turnover in employees. The homes are sold and resold as a routine, and the town council sees the same turnover in attendance at meetings and on the elected council board. This is good for eliminating the familial influence that frequently runs and ruins a town. The men and women on these councils are normally forward looking people who desire the best for all and their families. A common occurrence is the establishment of a city planning committee that seeks controlled growth, environmentally friendly industry, and the laying out of the city plat on a grid consistent with long-term planning. A community of this nature is a fine place to establish a business, raise a family, and begin a long-term career (including pastoring) while partaking in community affairs without being the automatic outsider.

Within the realm of structural interplay, there is the acceptance/nonacceptance element. As already stated, there are certain groups and individuals that simply will never be accepted into the mainstream of social life. In addition, there are certain social concerns that will be, or will not be, accepted on a community-wide scale. Racism is one example. In the town near my childhood home, people of color were not accepted. Those who associated with people of color were not accepted. Those who supported any civil liberty movement for people of color were not accepted. People of color were mostly thought of as Blacks, but included in this category were Orientals, American Indians, Mexicans, South Pacific Islanders, and etc. — in other words, anyone who was not white. Those were individuals who were not going to be accepted. One could sympathize with their color, but that did not change the fact of the matter: they were not white. They were fitted into the category of nonacceptance along with

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anyone who supported them or their cause. On the other hand, there are those liberated small towns that are made of a variety of races. There are mixed marriages with mixed children who go to multicultural schools. Such was the case at the last town I pastored. There were Natives, Whites, Cambodians, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos, Samoans, Latinos, Blacks, and an occasional Russian. All of these were part of a town of approximately 4,000 people.

Another issue of acceptance/nonacceptance is in regard to the dark past of some individuals. Many small towns will not tolerate a person with a criminal record, no matter how clean the person may be now. The record could be many years in the past, but must always be kept secret for fear of the person becoming shunned and outcast. Nevertheless, again, there are communities in which a person may go to begin a new life with a new identity. That community will not worry about the past as long as the person is not wanted currently, and as long as he or she never reverts back to the old lifestyle. The second community in which I pastored also had this attitude. There were several individuals with a cloudy past who lived and worked in the community, and raised families, who began a new life with complete acceptance from the town. In contrast to this is the community who will not accept a person with a record. My first pastorate was in a town with many families descended from outlaw groups of the Civil War Era. They were accepting of their own wrongdoings, but not of the outsider who was starting life anew. That person would always be a criminal, whereas, one of their own could get into fight, shoot or knife the other party, and it was just a natural part of life. Odd, yes. But that is the way it is even today in that town.

This brings me to a look at the social ills of the small town. Rather than making a long list of singular sins that befall a community, I have grouped them into three major settings. They are *acceptable*, *non-corrective*, and *elephants*. Strange as it may seem, there are some vices, or ills, that are allowed to continue unchecked. There are some wrongdoings that are never forgotten, and there are some habits that will never be changed. For the person contemplating pastoring a small community, here are more considerations before taking the plunge. Many small towns have social ills that are what I call acceptable behaviors, that is, they are acceptable among the general population. Although the locals may not like the situation, and may pray for changes, they

most likely will do nothing to hold the perpetrator accountable. As an example, drunkenness and drug abuse may run rampant in the small town to the extent that the per capita usage is far higher than the metropolitan areas of the country. Those areas of the country normally considered the “fast lane” would probably have fewer actual cases of substance abuse than the small village. In one state where I pastored, there were many “dry” villages. That is, they had outlawed any form of alcoholic beverage to be sold, manufactured, or brought to the community. As a result, families would send for certain brands of women’s hair spray that came in one gallon jugs—four to a case—and would drink this in place of liquor. This may sound far-fetched, but is sadly true. No one in the town would stop this illicit and dangerous behavior because the violators were family. Only when those who imbibed hallucinated to the point of being a threat to others would they call the police, and then it was only to control the person. Never would they press charges, and they certainly did not want their cousin, uncle, auntie, brother, sister, mother, father, son, or daughter to be sent away for any length of time to dry out.

One community had a doctor who was known to be a molester of women and adolescent girls. He had fathered more than one illegitimate child, and regularly prescribed addictive drugs to the locals—particularly the women with whom he had taken liberties. He was a promoter and maker of pornographic films. However, he was also in the leadership of a secret society that pledges oaths to support its members regardless of what that person may be guilty. He held sway over many of the men of the community because of “favors” performed for them, be it drug supplying, dabbling in pornography, etc. This information was common knowledge among those “in the know,” but when it became a public matter it caused great division in the town. Most did not want to know the details of his involvement in this illicit activity. Political leaders remained silent because they were all a part of the infrastructure in which he was involved. The doctor had friends in the judicial system throughout the state.

The end result was that the family who had spilled the information, whose own daughter had years of problems stemming from this doctor’s activity, and who had been great contributors of the community for over thirty years, had to leave town. Their lives were destroyed. They had to start over in an-

other state as many one-time friends abandoned them in favor of just letting things alone. The doctor is still in the community, never spent a day in jail, and was never fined. There was some discussion as to whether he could keep his medical license, but for all intents and purposes he is still a major figurehead in the town—even having had a “spiritual awakening” a short time after this information was made public. The point to be made here is that in the larger cities of America, this would not have been allowed to fester once it was made public. That is not to say there are no injustices in the large city, but the impact on the community as a whole is far more devastating to a small community. The population of the large community can seek out a different doctor; can associate with other people who are unknown to their one-time circle of friends. But the small community does not readily have that opportunity. They see each other on the street every day and must attend the local activities together. Chances are very good that there simply is no other doctor to which they can go for treatment. The strife must be resolved—either everyone makes up, or someone must leave. Indeed, the tensions generated as a result of strife in the small community can, and do, cause emotional and psychological problems (even physical problems) for those directly involved, even if they had no direct part in the illicit activity. They may not be a victim, but can be, and usually are found in the precarious position of choosing sides in the conflict. The community therefore becomes paralyzed, not just polarized, until the conflict is resolved. It literally cannot move forward as this subject occupies every conversation and waking moment in the lives of those living in that town.

This fact gives rise to the common, and disparaging remark from cynical persons having seen this dynamic in action, “nothing has changed.” Truly, much time can pass, yet the town continues to dwell on the subject as if in a time warp. It is similar to a soap opera on television whereby one may not view *The Days of Our Lives* for several months, or years, and still know the subject matter when tuning in.

This story plays well into the next item called non-corrective types of social ills. There are certain behaviors in small towns that are as much a part of the lifestyle as are leaves on trees. For instance, in one of the towns I pastored it was said that almost all of the Native American girls, and a large percentage of the boys,

had been sexually molested by the time they were fourteen years of age. In fact, this is a common occurrence among Native communities in that state, the perpetrators being the brother, uncle, and father. The general attitude among the females, particularly the older females, is that it is a part of life. One may hear the comment, "Well it happened to me and my sisters and every other woman I know, so it might as well happen to you." Or "What are you crying about? That's just the way men are!" It is a very hard, misery-loves-company attitude that will probably not change in the near future, and is accompanied by a don't-bother-me-with-the-details mentality. Many of the older women know their boys and male family members, even husbands, are carrying on this activity but refuse to confront the issue. It is centuries old.

The list of non-corrective topics could go on and on (I have already mentioned the attitude about poaching wild game), but the point here is to draw a general picture that there are some things wrong with the lives of the people in these small towns. Those wrongs are not to be corrected, nor can they be corrected without the people's complete submission to God. More than once I was told, "I know what the Bible says, but..." It is the equivalent of trying to tell the poor in Columbia they can no longer grow coca. It will not stop until a drastic and personal encounter with God takes place in their lives.

There is a saying that elephants never forget once they learn something. An elephant baby can be taught to stay in one place by chaining its leg to a stake. When the elephant grows to adulthood it does not realize that it has the strength to simply pull the stake out of the ground and walk away. Instead, it will languish obediently, tied to a small stake, ignorant of its own power. In the small town there is an elephant mentality that dictates how life will be lived. For instance, it is quite common for a farmer or rancher to state that "things have been done this way for fifty years, why change now?" I will never forget the time I made a suggestion to one farmer who had fought with noxious weeds in his wheat for many years. Some land is not made for growing crops, but will grow a rather luscious crop of thistles—Bull, Canadian, etc. This farmer had a large section of land that refused to grow wheat to his satisfaction so I mentioned the fact that there was, and still is, a big market for thistle seed used in bird feeders and other food products. He would not have to worry

about drought conditions and he could reap from the ground what was endemic to the area without great expense in cultivation. But the elephant was in charge. He was insulted to think that I would even discuss such a proposal to one who had carried on the traditions of over 100 years battling those pesky devils. It was not even fathomable for him to consider it. So ingrained are the traditions of many of the nation's small towns that they are stifled in their search for solutions to their problems. Of course, long-held beliefs and traditions have their place in society, and the rural small town has been the leader in the fight against supplanting those traditions. However, in many ways that same good quality works to their detriment if carried too far.

Another example of this elephant mindset is in the traditional fishing industry. A fisherman gains his livelihood from going out on the high seas, setting his nets and hooks, dropping his pots in the water, and generally feeling the freedom that only those of us who have been there could possibly understand. With the depletion of native stocks of marketable fish, i.e. salmon, halibut, cod, shrimp, etc., a viable solution is in fish farming. The coastal waters of Chile in South America have long been utilized in the raising of salmon stocks for the worldwide market. The coastal waters of North America, particularly along the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska, are also excellent areas for farming salmon. However, the traditional fisherman views the whole process with contempt. Why? Farming involves year-round commitment to work and maintenance of a facility, whereas, traditional fishing is strictly seasonal. For the fisherman, he would have to change his entire lifestyle. That is, he could no longer reap a whirlwind profit in a few short weeks out on the water, but rather would need to be landbound for much of the year. He could not go to Hawaii for six months of the year on vacation because he would have responsibilities at the farm.

It can be seen here that the very idea of fish farming to a free fisherman is repulsive. So repulsive, in fact, that laws have been passed against farming of most fish species in the State of Alaska (British Columbia also has laws regulating the production of fish as well, but I am unfamiliar with them). The lobbyists did their jobs quite well. So, those who enjoy working with fish, and do not mind working year around, must limit themselves to working in the spawning fisheries arena. Hatcheries. Unfortunately,

the fishermen have shot themselves in the foot with their lobbying. Many of the traditional fisherman have had to hang up their nets because there simply is not enough fish to go around—only the strongest and luckiest survive. If they *do* happen to love working with fish they are out of luck. They have passed laws against themselves and cannot farm fish for profit or otherwise. As a result, the South American fish farmers are cleaning up on profits with the world demand for fresh fish. The world could care less where the fish come from as long as it is palatable. Much of the fresh salmon in local supermarkets today come from Chilean growers. Fish on ice that says “Atlantic Salmon” does not necessarily mean it came from the East Coast. Atlantic Salmon is a specie that is easy to grow in many parts of the world.

These are only two examples of many in which elephants control the community. Consider the impact this mentality has on the church. A new pastor comes to town with good ideas for rejuvenating the life of the congregation. He wants to do the song service a little different; design the liturgy not so rigid and predictable; promote congregational involvement in the service; or perhaps move some of the furniture to better facilitate newcomers and the seeking. But wait! He is viewed as changing that which has been done for over fifty years. Those in control are happy with the way things are. Although the elders seek to draw in new blood, they do not want to do what is necessary to draw and keep the new blood because it means changing that with which they are familiar. It will demand effort on their part; for many generations the public has come to them. Why should they now reach out to the public? The pastor was always the drawing card, now the pastor is saying he is not the drawing card—that the church must work together as a team. The end result: nothing is changed, the pastor leaves, and the church continues to decline in numbers and importance.

I recently interviewed at a church that was seeking a new pastor. They wanted to grow. They wanted a change. They wanted new life. They wanted to attract new blood. But...they wanted to keep their fifty-year-old building. They wanted to stay in the same location with no room for expansion. They wanted to retain the same traditional white man attempts to reach the community that had seen a complete turnover in ethnicity in the last twenty years. They wanted to keep the same personnel on staff that had done nothing to alleviate the difficulties the church

was facing. Etc., etc., etc. Elephants, elephants, elephants. If new ideas and attempts at improvement are not a priority with the elders, then they are no better than elephants. Nothing will change, to their demise.

### *History*

There is a history in each community with which one must reckon. History plays an important role in the structure of the town, and in the general attitudes, ethics, and morals. For example, if a town was founded by renegade outlaws from the Civil War period there will be an overweening sense of outlaw rebellion among the populace. The wise observer of human nature and interaction will take note of four specific concerns. First, there is the issue of who and when settled in the area. The town's identity oftentimes is found through the type of individuals who first settled the area and set the tone for future generations. One town can be founded by fishermen, while another was founded by miners, and a third founded by loggers. The Silicon Valley is largely settled by (and consequently the modern version founded by) young, talented computer gurus and those who work for the high paying technical industry. They are leaving a legacy in our time that will be felt for the next 100 years or more. Also, the timeframe, when this took place, also plays an important role as a historical setting. Was the town founded because of natural disaster, war, economic trouble, racial tensions, etc.? The entire city of Valdez, Alaska was moved because of the tragic results of the 1964 earthquake. Many continue to live their lives on those past events as they are daily reminded why they are located in the present geographic position. Any newcomer will eventually receive an education from one of the locals about what it means to have your life torn apart suddenly, without warning. They know what hardship is about, and live their lives accordingly.

This also is a part of the why and how the town was settled. For instance, some of the areas of the Western U. S. were havens for renegades, outlaws, or those who simply wanted to be isolated from society. They deliberately chose areas to settle they knew no one else wanted. If there was little opportunity to earn an income, then the buildings would reflect that economy. Perhaps the town would be somewhat haphazardly put together, since there would be no person of education or status who could lay out a plan, city charter, etc. In one of the towns I pastored,

the settlers had nothing in which to live except what they could scrape out of a hillside—a dugout—since there were no trees for lumber, and very little money in the community to have lumber shipped into the area. It was extremely isolated, and prone to drought. When it *did* eventually rain the ground turned to sticky clay in which it was impossible to work or travel. This was one of the last areas of America open to homesteading. Many attempted to make a living out of badlands, but only a few very tough families survived, and some of those did not survive because of up-standing business dealings. But survive they did!

The third item of community history that must be considered is the growth and changes that are forced upon the town. Earthquake has already been mentioned. Flood, the economy, and a host of other natural and man-made influences cause a town to stretch and grow. This is normally a trial, a transition period, traumatic for many. There are only two ways to handle growth and changes in life—resist and resent the inevitable, or embrace and envision the potential. In many small towns there are both types of individuals. Also in those small towns, there is usually a play for control during those times. If a balance can be struck between the two schools of thought the town will experience controlled growth. However, in many small towns one or the other usually becomes the victor. If the resisters gain the upper hand, the visionaries will probably leave the town to die out from lack of growth. If the visionaries gain the upper hand, the resisters storm the gates of city hall every time new zoning laws are enacted. When a newcomer arrives in the town it would be wise for him or her to consider who is in charge of the community before deciding to invest. If that person likes things to stay in a frozen state politically and economically, with no growth, then they will probably enjoy their lives in an area that mirrors those values. They will not enjoy constant change. On the other hand, those who enjoy growth and change as a part of the routine of life will find themselves feeling suffocated in a town that does not mirror their personality.

Finally, the hardships and stabilizing factors in the history of a community will determine how they will handle any future hardships. Questions to ask are: Did the natural disaster draw the town together to assist one another? Did the man-made economic hardship serve to solidify commitments to relationships, or did it only facilitate further separations in the balance of pow-



er and possessions between the haves and the have nots? Were people looking for someone to blame with pointed finger, or did they seek an opportunity to learn from mistakes and situations out of their control? As a rule, small communities are known for their ability to pull together during hard times, but that rule does not preclude all situations in all small towns. One must analyze the end results of the historical hardships a small town has endured to be able to determine present and future emotional and relational stability among its members.

History involves not only the community but also the church. The pastor who arrives in the small community to take charge of a fledgling congregation of less than 100 souls must remember the background of the church. Although much of this article deals with the community as a whole, and the surrounding area, I count seven items of concern within the church alone. This list is not necessarily in order of importance, but deals with the issues that greatly effect the members, and, for the pastor, the running of the institution.

First, the old timers will be quite concerned with the church when planted. That is, the date the church was planted. Sometimes this takes into account the first tent meeting that was held to evangelize the community, or perhaps, it may revolve around the first building rented by the newly formed congregation. Whatever the case, there is usually a great deal of pride in the past involvement of the more elderly individuals in the congregation. Along with the past setting in order of the church, there is always a sacred cow or two with which one must reckon. For instance, one church I spoke at many years ago was once an Episcopal Church that was attended by certain persons of some status in the community. The Episcopal Church eventually died out and the building was sold to the congregation to which I spoke. There were icons, brass-plated items of furniture, and other non-essential items that clearly set the church apart as distinctly Episcopalian—old Episcopalian. Now, I have no problems generally speaking with the Episcopal Church, but these items were clearly out of place in this denomination. They went against the grain of the belief system, and were very much outdated. Yet, when it was mentioned that perhaps they would be better suited removed to an Episcopal Church in another area, the elders in the church exclaimed that many of the items were donated in memory of “so-and-so.” “So-and-so” was an aunt or

sister or father or uncle or grandfather (etc.) of many of the congregants attending the newly formed congregation. Many of the “in-memory-of’s” had been deceased for decades but were a part of the history of the community. Remember the elephants? The inappropriate items were never removed, and the church never grew – the new church across the street did.

This is the point at which it is important to understand the families involved in the workings of the church. How far back in history do these families have ties to the present church, and how much influence do they have in the decisions affecting the building of the congregation and the many ministries to which the church is commissioned? I’ll never forget a little old lady, of some community influence, who reprimanded me for not stopping an individual in the church from speaking out of turn. She was quite adamant in her opinion that the Bible was being violated somehow because it did not allow certain types of disorder in the church. I calmed her down and assured her that no one was meaning any harm, and that I thought God would understand if we had done something out of the ordinary. She was truly very religious about the whole topic. About four hours later I walked into the local supermarket and she was there at the checkout. So, being the familiar pastor that I am, I teasingly “snooped” in her grocery sack. Lo and behold, there was a six-pack of Budweiser beer that she was taking home. Tall ones. I smiled and told her I hoped she had a nice day. I never heard another word in judgment about the goings on in church. Sometimes a family will be large, domineering, and instrumental in the very earliest beginnings of the church. Maybe they were the ones that called the first evangelist to set up tent meetings, or their grandfather was the first board member. If the family is generally progressive they will be continually seeking ways to reach the lost with new and innovative ideas. However, the opposite may also be true. They may not want to change anything their forefathers had done because they view change as disrespectful of their rich heritage. If they have enough power and influence with the rest of the congregation then the progression of the church will be directly affected.

A family’s influence is closely interwoven into the fabric of the local culture. Over the course of several generations of churchgoers there emerges an influential family. Much the same as the community power players, the church has its power play-

ers as well. As a result of many generations of strong influence, the balance of the congregation is inherently conditioned to accept the ways in which the standards of operation are administered. Thus, if a family is strongly anti-authority and is able to maintain control of the church for several generations, the general attitude of the believers will be contempt toward any authority. This includes the authority of the pastor. Those holding any type of authority in contempt have abused many good men. According to Robinson & Stern (1997) "A bad system will beat a good person every time" (p.29), and this is certainly true in the church. Oftentimes, the local culture is mirrored by the members of the congregation, and especially by those in control. This is not to say that the opposite cannot be true. If there is an influential family, or group of persons, who is predisposed to show proper respect for the office of pastor regardless of the individual holding the office, then the outward show of contempt will not be a problem. They will know how to conduct themselves regarding the ebb and flow of interpersonal communication between the pastor, the congregation, and themselves.

There are many other factors involved in the culture of a church and one more example is in order here. That example is the education of the pastor and leadership of the church. Some areas have little in common with college-educated men and women who cannot relate to the "little people" of the community. The man or woman with the master's degree, or doctorate, is viewed as someone so far above the people that he or she has lost touch with the reality of small town living. This may or may not be correct thinking, however, it is something to keep in mind when attempting to communicate in an area of simple blue collar workers who have only known hardship and calluses on their hands from manual labor. In that situation, it is much better to be known as pastor rather than Rev. Doctor. Some men and women with a high level of education have wisely chosen to be simply known and addressed by their first names. On the other hand, some areas of the country will only respect those with obvious education. If one comes too close to the level of the local populace they will see that person as no different than themselves, and will treat that person accordingly. As can be seen here, a quick and thorough analysis is in order for the individual serious about moving to a small town to minister. In the same manner as the relationship between teacher and student must be main-

tained, so the proper relationship between congregant and pastor must be maintained.

Another historic topic for discussion here is the constitution and bylaws of the church. These are typically set in order when the congregation decides to incorporate. Along with the Articles of Incorporation the recording agency will need to be informed of the constitution of the new corporate body, that is, what it stands for and what it expects to accomplish. Some agencies will also need the operating procedures, the bylaws, to be included in the general package. They want to know if you have a plan of operation that will comply with corporate law and can be used as a guideline for maintaining a semblance of order in the corporation. These demands may vary according to the agency, but the point here is that the constitution and bylaws greatly affect the way a church is run. If they are written in such a way as to put the children in charge of the candy store, then the pastor will have nothing in which to assert his God-ordained authority. At the same time, the bylaws need to be written in a manner that prevents abuse by the pastor and other leadership. Now, here is where the combined influence of culture and family merge. American culture, generally speaking, is suspicious of any authority that would determine how a business, government office, corporation, etc., is operated. We are a nation of rebels. If we do not like the way our company is running, we strike. If we do not like the way our government is running, we slander and destroy political members' character. We are very opinionated and seem to think we have all the answers to every problem known to man. However, contrary to popular opinion, this mentality is incorrect thinking. Usually, those who are not on the cutting edge of running a country or company do not know all the details why things are operating in any given manner. Therefore, without thorough and educated understanding, the general populace is open to manipulation and malice at the hands of evildoers.

When the constitution and bylaws of a church are set in order, these things must be taken into consideration and written in such a way so as to reduce the possibility of such a thing happening. Many congregations, and good men and women, have been destroyed at the hands of persons with their own agenda who have realized the weaknesses of the written policy of the church. The churches I pastored both had policies in which the

pastor was voted on every three years. The upshot of this policy is that if someone was tired of the pastor (whether he felt it was time to leave or not, or whether there was a sin committed or not) he or she could start talking among the members with the purpose of agitation. This is the personal agenda used to manipulate the uninformed. It is called politics and has no business in the church or in the heart of the Christian who is serious in his/her walk with God. The family who has an over abundance of personal power bears watching. Not only the planting of the church and its written policies will reflect their agenda, but also the setting up and removal of the pastor.

Another way politics plays into the realm of church policy is in the positions of leadership. For example, the Bible is quite clear on the separation of elder and deacon although there are some definite similarities in the qualifications for the two offices. But, if the bylaws of the church do not delineate between them, then the natural inclination is to consider the deacon's position equivalent to the elder's position. When the congregation is nominating and voting on who is to be deacon, and the deacon is now considered the authority over the pastor and congregation, then what results is a kangaroo system of polling. The one who is elected will be the one who is popular, and most likely the qualifications will not be closely monitored. He may have done some politicking behind the scenes, and now has authority that he should never have. If he has a problem with the pastor, the pastor loses. The deacon is the people's choice and the pastor is an outsider. This unfortunate scenario is played out repeatedly each year in many churches. The pastor of one church, when I asked how he dealt with this nasty set-up, told me that he simply used a psychological game on the deacons. He would manipulate the dialogue and allow them to think they retained power and control. The result was that he got what he wanted anyway. Unfortunately, that style of leadership is not exactly what I would call healthy or Biblically sound. Recommendation: check out the families, the constitution and bylaws, the culture, and the politics before securing a pastorate.

Included in the history of the church is the history of previous pastors. One should take note of the average length of service each pastor held at the church since its inception. If the church has been in existence for 40-50 years, and the average length of service of its pastors is only three years, then something

is significantly amiss within the workings of the church. One should look at the type of community as discussed earlier. Perhaps it is a community that has stagnated or declined in growth. Also, a quick check of the bylaws will reveal the nature of the political structure of the church. Next, see who has been the most influential party, or family, within the church throughout its history. Another aspect to this scenario is the theology of that particular congregation. Sometimes emotionally unstable, and spiritually unstable, persons are the ones in “control” of the church. That is, there are whole communities, or congregations, that operate on a dysfunctional level. Emotionally they are unstable, but this is normal for them and they resent any interference the typical pastor will attempt to make in their lives. Correction is not their idea of a good pastor. This is true of their spiritual lives as well. They will have definite ideas of what a pastor should do and be, and if the pastor does not preach what they seek to hear then he will be ousted. They do not want correction of theologically unsound practices. I remember very well a time when one of my deacons called me aside to query me on my spiritual life. It seems as though I was not quite “unsound” enough for him and some of the other congregants, and they interpreted my refusal to get flaky in doctrine as a lack of spiritual insight and maturity. This mentality was a thorn in my side until the day we departed that pastorate. If they are not getting what they want in the form of pacification of these subjects—bye bye pastor. It is interesting to note, also, that some churches attract people of unstable character, personalities, and theologies simply because of who is in charge of the congregation. It is wise for the new pastor to realize that he or she is not truly the one in authority in most church situations.

The reverse of this can be true, as well. In other words, sometimes a pastor brutalizes a church. Simply because previous pastors have had long terms of service in a particular church does not automatically indicate that the congregation is stable. Here again, if the main family is conditioned to be totally subservient to the authority of the pastor, and that family is the prime example for others to follow, then the potential to raise up an entire congregation fearful of a misstep is very real. The abuses of the Church of England and the Catholic Church are but a couple of excellent examples of entire nations and cultures held in check by an overweening authoritarian style of church government. It

can happen in any congregation, in any denomination. There must be balance. The style of leadership within former pastoral staffs can be an enlightening indicator of the balance of power; of the stability of theological, spiritual, and emotional characteristics of pastors and congregations.

A vital bit of insight that is extremely valuable to the history of the church, particularly as it pertains to its growth and/or decline in persons in attendance and any future growth, is the reputations of several subjects related to the church. These subjects reflect positively, negatively, or with total indifference upon the church. First, the power players have a standing in the community that can help or hurt the growth and community concept of the nature of a particular congregation. If the power players are highly respected and have the proper perspective of spiritual life, without being preachy and condescending toward others, they can greatly influence for Christ many who would normally never grace the door of a church. On the other hand, if the leader (power player) is too spiritually minded to be of any earthly good, that is, cannot relate to the secular world without making everything into a Bible-quoting sermon, then the community will hold him and what he represents at arm's length. Similarly, if the leader is a crook, or has a poor reputation in business and interpersonal dealings with the members of the community, the chances are very good that the town will consider the church a mockery. After all, it placed that person in a position of leadership, or at least is allowing that person a great degree of control, so that is what the congregation wants. I was once in a discussion with a prominent professional in the community where I was pastoring who told me how much he liked me and my attitude. My relationship with God was genuine he said, and he would attend our church if it weren't for the fact that it was known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Church of \_\_\_\_\_. He interjected a church board members' name at this point with obvious contempt in his voice, and included a few observations of his own regarding the dealings of the board member in the community and with himself. Over the years, I have often heard this same statement repeated in other small towns, including those areas I have pastored. One man was a steady attendee in the adult Sunday School class until another individual began to teach for one Quarter. When I approached the man about his absence, he informed me that he was not going to volunteer any information,

but since I asked....I then received an earful about the personal dealings this professional man had encountered with the SS teacher in question. This man believed the teacher's behavior was despicable for one who claimed to be Christian, and he would return to class when the teacher was finished with his term. Needless to say, I never allowed that teacher to teach again before we left that pastorate. There were other incidences also of which I was subsequently informed by other people.

Second, the local church is known by its organization within, and by the one it represents. In the eyes of the town, it has established a reputation based on its theology, its doctrines, and its politics. Some congregations have a theology that is simply so out of touch with reality that even the unspiritual can recognize the fallacy of their beliefs. A good example of this is the leadership of a church who believes the only answer to a social problem is to pray without doing anything to remedy said problem. They somehow think that God is going to wave a magic wand over the area and make things all better. This is a whitewash that is clearly detested, and lambasted, in James 2:14-26 and 1 John 3:18. I became tired of hearing this type of shirking of Christian responsibility. Once, when a church leader decided *I* needed to "pray harder" for the remedy to a community problem, I asked him how hard he thought *I* needed to pray. God hears prayer that is from the heart, in humility, without pretense. I told him the time for prayer had passed and God had given clear instruction through His Word how *we*, as a church, were commissioned to address this problem. "Well," he said, "I mean you need to pray more intensely." He obviously missed my point. So I gripped the underside of my chair in which I was sitting, strained, clenched my jaw, bared my teeth, and squinted my eyes shut. Then I asked him if he thought that was intense enough. He was not amused, but I thought I was quite clever though it had no effect on his behavior.

The form of prayer that takes place within a congregational gathering is an indicator of the theology of the members. For instance, a demanding tone during prayer; a reminder to God how He has promised certain things; a tone of personal authority on the part of the pray-er; cheerleading during prayer (c'mon God); shouting, slobbering, spitting, slamming of the fist, screwing up the face as though in agony, etc., speak loud and clear of a God who is not in charge of the spiritual realm to any visitor in at-



tendance observing this behavior.

There are many ways in which the theology of a church can affect its impact in the community, but, to move on, its doctrines also greatly affect its standing in the community. Doctrines are the stands on issues it is willing to enforce. This could be in the form of style of dress, acceptable recreational activities, or the extent of interaction with the unsaved of the community. The visual effect of hypocrisy comes roaring to the surface in the church world at this point. Whereas, there is hypocrisy on a theological level, it generally takes a more subtle form—one that is not as obvious to the secular world. An example of one type of doctrinal incongruity is in the attitude and interaction of the Christian with secular community members. Oftentimes, a Christian will be quite obvious in his or her distaste of someone from the bar crowd and be very friendly with a longstanding church member. If the facts were to be made known, the church member might be judgmental, manipulative, and generally untrustworthy. On the other hand, the bar person will accept others at face value, without judgment, and will speak the truth by telling someone what he or she thinks because they refuse to put on a pretense. This is a case of what I term “reversed grace.” The secular community may have more tolerance for others than the local church members, notwithstanding the fact that sin is sin, but Christians are supposed to be enlightened with the capacity to see the unsaved as not knowing any better actions. Unfortunately, if the secular portion of the town extends the hand of compassion and displays a form of love for the lost more often than the church, then we have doctrinal incongruity. The church preaches love, compassion, and understanding, but neglects the outward display.

Third, another way the community views the church organization is in the way it conducts its polity. Here is where the overall picture of the church gains or loses its rapport with the community. Its theology may be overlooked, and its individuals may be excused, but the politics played out within its walls cause great division and untold hurt. It effects the whole town as people are interrelated and interconnected with those in attendance at the church. Many denominations grant the local congregation its own sovereignty with the authority to elect deacons and pastors. It also grants them the authority to remove and replace any of those leaders. This means that the power players in the church

will have free reign to manipulate and/or malign the whole congregation against capable leadership with the intention of serving a personal agenda. This event is carried out daily across America, and the unsaved world not only watches but remembers. It is history. History of the local congregation. How sordid it sometimes is! So, the organization of the church is important when viewing the history of the church.

Now we turn to the pastor and the history of the many clergy that have passed through the doors of the local church. Some may have been good men, but without any backbone. Others may have been out of touch with the local needs and only concerned with strictly spiritual matters—unable to relate to economic problems and the humdrum of the working class. Still others may have been viewed by the local townsfolk as somewhat less than manly, a little on the soft side physically and even emotionally. One pastor I followed would make a great scene on the street when someone in need approached him. The laying on of hands and shouting in prayer ensued with everyone watching much to the embarrassment of the poor fellow who was sharing his life's woes. This pastor who would go about in the "power of the Holy Spirit" was the same one who could not manage to keep the books in order and the bills paid in the community. He was a great offence to many, and it took me two years to gain the respect of the community because of my position as a pastor of that particular church. One pastor set up a speaker on the roof of the parsonage, pointed it at the Catholic Church across the narrow street, and thundered damnation and hellfire over the microphone while they were having their services. We (our congregation) did not have a good relationship with the Catholic portion of the town as a result, and *that* incident had taken place many years prior to my arrival in the town. The other town I pastored had a long history of pastors who had been judgmental and derogatory in their remarks toward the Lutheran Church and its members. The first two years of that pastorate was somewhat tense in relation to the Lutherans and their pastor. Today, we are very good friends. An enormous effort was put forth to heal the wounds perpetrated by my religious brethren. History was made. Never in the fifty-year history of the church I pastored, was there ever a time of genuine fellowship with the Lutherans, and true friendship, on the level that glorified God as much as our relationship did at that time. This is a sad fact, but

important to note. Pastors can, and do, have an influence in the community.

It is important to note the credit the church has in the small town, meaning its monetary credit. When a church uses water, sewer, electricity, gas, trash pickup, and etc., it should be expected to pay its bills in the same timely fashion as any other business. However, because it is a nonprofit religious corporation, many church leaders would ask for leniency to the extent that several months past due expenses may exist on the books in any one of those utilities. In the small town this spells certain disaster to the witness of the church. The church and its members become known as takers, leeches, incompetents, abusers, those who take advantage of others, and so on. The business people are just common folks who talk among themselves (remember everyone is related) and will naturally assume that all preachers and parishioners are the same—bums. The witness to the leaders of the community is extremely important. Better to go without bread than have bad credit in the small town.

Finally, in this section of history I must address the topic of credibility. This has been touched upon already, but, for clarification and emphasis it cannot be stressed enough that credibility is of the utmost importance in the Christian witness. There can be leniency and grace extended to the church when found wanting in some of the areas already discussed, but when the credibility of the church is damaged there simply is no witness. Credibility involves the integrity of its people and organization; the trustworthiness of its word on controversial matters; the maintaining of Biblical standards before the public; and the modeling of congruence in the face of overwhelming unpopularity. In short, the public does not need to love the church, or like the church, but it must respect the church if there is ever to be a positive impact in the community. The greatest compliment a congregation can receive comes from someone outside the church who would say to others in its defense, "They were there when I needed a hand. They live their faith."

*Pastor*

This section must be devoted to the role of the pastor. The pastor has the unique position as mentor, guide, counselor, father figure, professional; advocate of all that is pure, just, and holy. He must be all things to all people. He must be a man's

man, yet with a tenderness that bespeaks a feminine-type compassion and mercy much the same as Jesus did when He walked the earth. He must have the ability to work hard with his hands, and use his mind with a goodly amount of intelligence. He should be quick to learn of the community, its culture, its economic base (mining, logging, farming, manufacturing, etc.), and new social skills for interaction with the community members. The pastor's ability to adjust and relate to the community in all facets of life, and do so quickly, will partially determine the success of his or her ministry. Many small town people view the pastor with derision inasmuch as the pastor is considered a soft person who can relate only to women. Thus Christianity is a woman's religion. Of course, this is a stereotype discussed by Weiten (1997) who says "Occupational stereotypes suggest that lawyers are manipulative, accountants are conforming, artists are moody, and so forth" (p.447). The pastor who can mechanic, farm, do construction, yet sew a little girl's dress, cook, and clean will manage to lead an example for both men and women—an example for the men because the pastor can do manly things; for the women because the pastor is man enough to demonstrate characteristics more acquainted with women's work without his male ego being threatened.

All of these characteristics affect the pastor's standing in the community. I have heard it said that all pastors are soft and fat, and only sit around eating cookies all day with little old ladies. There may be plenty of women in the church on Sunday morning as a result, but the men will hold a contemptuous attitude toward the pastor. If the pastor can be rough and tumble with the men of the area (branding cattle, docking sheep, fixing cars and trucks, cutting firewood, shoveling coal, etc.) it will greatly improve his standing among all people in the small town. In one of the towns I pastored docking lambs was an annual event. It took place out on the open prairie where the wind was cold and blowing constantly. Sheep are dirty and they are commonly afflicted with large ticks from the surrounding brush. I would involve myself in the party, helping those ranchers who needed an extra hand. It was dirty, stinky, and bloody work. There was plenty of good food, but no monetary gain. The upshot is that there were many people who knew of my willingness, without squeamishness, to lend a hand. As a matter of fact I rather enjoyed the work and fellowship with those men and women, and

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usually took my wife along, as she would help, too. This allowed me to relate on a personal level with individuals who would previously never grace the door of a church. Several gained respect for me and a new attitude for the office of pastor, and some actually came to church and became involved in the children's programs as helpers!

The issue of influence has been discussed earlier in this article regarding the church and the power players within, as well as those of the community in general. However, the influence of the pastor cannot be underestimated for no matter how much the pastor is manipulated and abused by his parishioners, the town is watching how he lives his life. The small town knows the pastor is what is called a "short-timer," that is, he and his family will never stay for their entire lives. So, the general population takes the pastor with a grain of salt, if you will, because after he has done his "thing" then he will leave. It is important for the pastor to understand that the common small town person feels that talk is cheap. They want to see the pastor and his family live the faith that is preached. They instinctively grasp the idea set forth in James 2:14,17 that says, "What good is it...if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (NIV). The concept of respect is not a debatable issue here. It is imperative the pastor be respected if he (she) is to have any influential rapport with the community. They want to see action, faith at work, the practical application of the preaching and teaching. The greatest compliment I have ever received is from a man who made no claim to religion. Yet, with tears in his eyes during our farewell party when leaving the community, he said, "I have seen many preachers come and go, and I have seen a lot of so-called Christians attempt to demonstrate their faith. All of their talk is fine I guess, but you are the only one that I have ever seen actually live the Christian faith as it is supposed to be lived. I will never forget that." People want, and need, a genuine demonstration of Christianity as a model for them to see and from which they can learn. The small town pastor should never be the center of attention; should never enter a room mouth first; should never loudly proclaim his beliefs. Rather, that pastor should simply start living as Jesus would live—quietly going about the work of ministering to the needs of the community. Is there a little old lady that needs her door put on the hinges? Fix it. Is there a mother with several children and a

vehicle that is in need of repair? Fix it. Is the neighbor down with the flu, or some other sickness, and have not been able to clean her house for a while? Clean it. Did a local man break his leg and needs his yard work done? Do it. Fix, clean, repair, work, do, etc., without strings attached. Take no mind to their personal faith, only be Christ-like to them and let Jesus do the rest. If an opportunity comes to tell about Jesus then a bonus has arrived in your day! Too often, the Christian, the pastor, will only make an effort as long as he or she feels there is a soul to gain. Then, when the person does not care to hear about God or becomes a little on the rude side with the visitor who is attempting to evangelize, the person is abandoned. No longer is the outreach carried forward. The person's attitude toward the Christian community is now worse than it was before, because he sees the Christian as not truly committed to his faith. The Christian was only nice because he wanted something—a soul. He really did not care for the *person* targeted in the outreach who has probably heard the same line before about coming to Jesus. I do not like the term “outreach” for this reason. Christians should live their faith all day every day regardless of who comes to the cross for the effort. This should be the normal Christian life. The small town moves slowly, and they will watch for years before making a decision, including watching the lives of those who claim faith in Jesus Christ.

The pastor should be aware of his or her communication style in the community to which one is assigned. One time, while teaching a study on a Wednesday night from the Book of Proverbs, a point was made about the lending of money. I had said that if a person was helping out the neighbor, or a friend, with some cash to alleviate some financial difficulty, that person should consider it a gift if the loan was not repaid. To lend without considering the possibility of default on the payment could lead to upset and the weakening of a friendship. So, if a person was loaning their friend a \$20 bill, they should not give it if there were “strings” attached. Several scriptures were quoted, and I had the few people in the service read them as well as share personal experiences in this area. One lady, however, was lost on the fact that she could not loan her friend \$20 to help her out. Of course, this is not what was said, and no matter how many of the parishioners tried to explain this to her, she left the service totally convinced I was dictating to her that she could not loan her

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friend any money. I had thought, at the time, that she was OK with the discussion and was understanding the line of thinking. However, two weeks later I was confronted by the very lady who would have been the recipient of the monetary loan. She demanded to know what I was teaching her friend, and who did I think I was to dictate to anyone how they were to handle their money!? The lady happened to be a hairdresser, so the entire town knew that I was teaching the people not to lend money to help their neighbors. There we stood almost in the middle of the street, nose to nose, as I explained the whole Bible study to her and how this lady (the one in church) just did not understand what the gist of the study was about. I had egg on my face in view of all the townsfolk who heard the sad story, but the hairdresser thought it was quite comical once she heard my side. Small town, big talk.

Now, some pastors are slow learners and I am no exception. To continue with this subject of communication, I had a confrontation with a lady who had deliberately undermined some arrangements that had been made for the care of her brother. Since my background is basically Eastern, that is, from the eastern part of the U.S., I have a tendency to be expressive in a way that makes most westerners uncomfortable. My voice raises, my arms wave, my hands gesture for emphasis. This lady was offended, said that I was shunning her (by waving my arms as if to say I've heard enough), and caused me to seriously explore my mode of communication. What is normal for one area of the country is simply not normal for another; what is clear can be unclear; what is acceptable in one part of the country can be very offensive in another. Stewart (1999) has this to say about body movement and gestures:

Forward lean is commonly interpreted as more involved and usually more positive....A direct vis-à-vis posture, movement toward the other, affirmative head nods, expressive hand gestures, and stretching are all rated as "warm" behaviors, while moving away picking one's teeth, shaking the head, and playing with hair are rated as "cold" (p.88).

I have been twenty-five years learning the western style of communication, and would love to boast of my accomplishments. God has a good sense of humor—He knows when to

humble me. The point here is to understand that certain areas of the country communicate vastly different than the manner in which one may be acquainted. Contrary to what Stewart refers to as common, I once drew a challenge to fight from a deacon who reacted to my leaning forward in a chair for emphasis while speaking to him about a misunderstanding. Also, picking of teeth while in conversation with another person was a sign that you were comfortable with the individual and had no "airs" to put on. The lady I mentioned above was offended at "common" hand gestures, which clearly indicates that a close study of the communication style of the locals is in order.

The first town I pastored was the center of one of the largest counties in the state, but had only 500 people (the entire county held only 1500 people). It had one little greasy-spoon restaurant where all the locals gathered at least once per week. The first time I took my family to the restaurant, all activity ceased. All conversation stopped, coffee mugs were held at mid-sip, the last drag on cigarettes was held extra long, and all eyes followed my family as we trudged to a corner booth and sat down. Even the waitress stared and the cook stopped cooking momentarily. The patrons apparently were making sure that we were not going to intrude into their space, and were giving themselves ample time to size us up. It truly was a most uncomfortable occasion, and one which is only seen in Hollywood western pictures. Yet, that was our introduction to the town. Every time we went there for the next six months we were stared at, with diminishing intensity, until the folks knew we were there to stay. I give this illustration to emphasize the fact that the pastor and his family must quickly establish community acceptance. It is imperative the pastor be highly visible in the small town. School functions must be attended even when he has no children involved. Walking to do business, being at the local market on a daily basis, gathering the mail at the post office, and taking time to chat with people when they feel so inclined, all contribute to the visibility of the pastor. Sometimes the pastor feels he must homeschool his children because the local school is simply not up to the standard he has set for his offspring. *Let the reader understand: the pastor who does this in a small town will incur the wrath of saint and sinner alike.* The gossip will be, "Fine. He doesn't feel our schools are good enough for him and his kids. Well, maybe his uppity religion isn't good enough for us. If that is the way he feels, and he wants to be sep-



arate from the community, then lets *let* him be separate." Here is another good example of being an outsider *and* unwelcome. Potential pastor—check out the schools first along with the checking of other items mentioned in this article. Once a pastor has committed to the church, he has committed to all the community has to offer, including the school system, and once the pastor has relocated it is too late to make any such decisions.

The old adage "grin and bear it" applies to the long-suffering expected of the pastor in a small town. Every job, or vocation, has its hardships and portions that are difficult to face. The pastorate has many hardships—some would say more than its fair share—not the least of which are the barrels of disparaging remarks that float about the community in which he is the pastor. The smaller the community the more susceptible he and his family are to the rumor mill and having himself, and portions of his family, served up at Sunday dinner by the ones who purport to be his staunchest supporters. There is the little old lady who is constantly angry at the lack of the pastor's attention. There is the deacon who wants his ego stroked by you calling him for every personal airing of dirty laundry. There is the Sunday School leader who determines that no one should have any say in the decisions regarding who is to be a teacher, or which curriculum to use. The frosting on this little cake is the fact that all of the personnel at the small-town church are volunteer. They cannot be fired for insubordination or sassing the boss (the pastor). The pastor must learn diplomacy since he or she has no monetary clout to hold over the heads of the people selected to do ministry work. Contrary to naïve understanding of church workers, not all are easy to handle, and not all have the things of God in mind. The only recourse for the pastor is to remove someone from the position due to consistent, and overbearing, non-Christian behavior. And that is only a last resort. Sometimes it is no resort. Sometimes one simply must bear the cross of suffering with individuals who are not qualified to hold office.

In addition, rumors abound about the pastor and his family. Unfortunately, many of the rumors come from the very people to whom the pastor is ministering. They run the gamut. Every conceivable nastiness about the pastor and his family that can be trumped up, manufactured, etc., is plausible. Some pastors experience all of it. For instance, if a person does not like the pastor, all that is necessary is for a rumor to start about the possibility of

him having an affair, or embezzling funds. Nothing need be proven. The gossip itself will do the job of removing him from his rightful place. Add to this parishioners who are constantly whining about everything possible such as the way the church is run, the songs that are sung, the liturgy, the subject matter in the sermon, and the way the maintenance is accomplished around the church grounds. Some church members demand all of the pastor's time in counsel and sympathy. If time is not given, more rumors start. A thick skin is what pastoring is about—if the pastor does not have one he will be sore all the time. The pastor who believes in privacy and secrecy in his or her ministry, a practice accepted in the larger cities, will find those privileges nonexistent in the small community if he wants to reach the hearts of the people and run interference with the gossip chain. They take a dim view of anyone who is secretive. This means one must live as openly as possible to dispel any attempt at defamation of character by those evil doers who would seek to destroy a minister. First Peter 2:12 says, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (NIV). This is no guarantee of protection from those who would seek to cause trouble, but it is sound practice in faith and a very effective deterrent to preacher bashing.

Acculturation has already been mentioned. The pastor who seeks to reach the community, who wishes to have a healthy rapport with them, who desires to understand them with the intention of meeting needs will make it a point to adjust culturally to his or her surroundings as quickly as possible. This includes learning the value system of the people. As an example, tithing was a major concern for the people in one of the churches I pastored. The Bible is very clear on the subject of giving tithes based on the increase, whether it is from farming, ranching, logging, fishing, manufacturing, drawing an hourly wage, etc. Yet, many of the farmers and ranchers would only give \$25 per week while at the same time spend hundreds or thousands on nonessential goodies such as guns, vacations, new pickups, and so on. The pastor starves, and is expected to starve, while they live high. Their whole concept of tithing was out of line with scripture, and would not be altered. When they were approached on the subject, a long dissertation ensued about the commitments they have with the bank, the state, the government, etc., and that they have

no control over what they can give to God's work. It did no good to show them scripture, or argue with them. They gave me \$1,000 per month and a parsonage. I paid all of my own taxes and Social Security plus tithes on the cash and value of the parsonage. (My tithing record was, in fact, larger than all of the members who were ranchers and farmers). This left very little at the end of the month, and I found it extremely difficult to find enough to buy food. There were times when I did not have enough money for milk or gas for my car. One year we did not have any funds for a Christmas tree, presents, or turkey dinner. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, we received an envelope with five \$100 bills and a note (from a person outside of the congregation) that said we were to have a good Christmas. I retrieved the discarded tree from a local store, which had cleaned up its displays and was closed for a couple of weeks over the holiday period, and then put gas in the car and took my family to the big city to buy something for Christmas. When my finances were discussed among the members of the congregation (yes, that too is a matter of public policy) they could not understand why we were having such a hard time with our finances. After all, they were only making \$1,000 per month, too, and they were doing just fine. Of course, they refused to see the fallacy in their income. Their income was play money since the taxes had already been deducted, and the food, gas, vehicle payments, and etc. were a part of the business expenses of the corporate farm. No amount of reasoning would correct this erroneous thinking. I was not able to adjust to that way of thinking and was told that perhaps I should get a job, which I did much to their dismay. They wanted a full time pastor, one who enjoyed starving, one who was submitted to the financial whims of the congregation. I resigned that church without regret, nevertheless, I learned a great deal about people and myself.

#### *Conclusion*

Clearly there is much more to be said of pastoring, and living, in a small community. My intention here is to utilize my experience as a teaching tool for anyone who would be inclined, or feel a calling to pastor in the small town. The political structure of the town and church; the social structure of the community and church; the history of the area and the church; and the pastor—his ability to acculturate and maintain a genuine Christian

character in the face of great adversity—all must be understood. At least a brief insight is in order. The experiences of myself and my family are very valuable to me, although some of the experiences were extremely painful as I have already mentioned. The man or woman who is called to pastor and lead a congregation must be made aware of the many different facets of small town living before “jumping” into a pastorate with a romanticized view of what awaits him or her.

There is, unfortunately, a serious lack of valuable information available to men and women who study for a church leadership position as it pertains to the typical small town situation into which most will find themselves drawn. This drawing can be from the feeling of pressure to settle into a church (internal self-pressure included), or from the need to fulfill and justify the calling of God on one’s life. Many young people today who graduate from seminaries and Bible colleges are indoctrinated with many success stories, or, at the least, left with the impression that, because of all of their wonderful training, they will naturally gain the church with a high level of educated people to appreciate their training. However, this simply is not the case as a rule. Yes, there are those who *do* enter immediately upon graduation into an ideal situation, but, like divine healing, it is the exception and not the rule.

In many of the evangelical and certainly in the Pentecostal/Charismatic gatherings of annual meetings—with guest speakers—the focus is on the successful and high profile churches with their leaders. Classes and seminars during these annual events will expound the ways and means of growing up a large and vibrant church, with the underlying meaning that if only the ministers would implement these tactics then all churches would be 1,000 strong in membership. This is simply not true and never has been. Our Bible schools are not equipped to face the possibility of losing large numbers of potential Christian workers to the secular job market, therefore, the secret is kept under wraps. This leads to great disillusionment among the graduating students who, several years after graduation and after many heartaches and sorrows, are met with ministry problems that have never been adequately addressed. Many a good man and woman has left the ministry because of that disillusionment and the lack of proper support, coupled with the seeming abandonment of their peers because they were considered “failures” in the ministry. In

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fact, they were inadequately trained or prepared and left with nowhere to turn.

Here, then, is an opportunity for one who is called to ministry to gain some insight into small town pastoring. It can be challenging in all ways—spiritually, physically, emotionally, and mentally—and it can be a wonderful time in a person’s life, full of joy and laughter, and full of the intimate relationships that all mankind longs and seeks after. But, let’s not enter that world unaware of the pitfalls and thereby leave oneself open to personal destruction and/or irreparable inner damage to spirit, psyche, and career.

As I have mentioned in the beginning of the article, I was raised in a small community and lived most of my adult life in small communities, that is, communities of less than 15,000 people. This fact of my life has given me insight that has allowed me to maintain a positive relationship with the members of those communities, and the secular portion of those communities in particular. Knowing that small town folks are “watchers” and “talkers” has caused me to be very aware of the lifestyle which I portray—public and private. A somewhat comical example of this comes to mind regarding the old-fashioned satellite dish. In the first community I pastored, the parsonage had a large dish on its rooftop. Common knowledge in the area said that if the dish was pointed toward the eastern sky then the person in the house was watching the pornography channels since that is the direction from which they came and the direction one had to position his satellite dish. The wind blows almost incessantly, and with great force at times in the deserts, plains, and mountain passes of the American West. Our area was no exception and, as a result, the dish was forced to face the east when the wind sheared off the holding pins. Needless to say, there were congregational members, and community members, who truly wondered at my spirituality. Fortunately, a good parishioner came to our door to inform us of the happening—we did not know since we did not have the television hooked up, but rather, were in a period of our lives (my family) in which the t.v. was not watched. Word quickly went through the community that the new pastor and his family were not perverts and face was saved. I subsequently had the dish removed in short order!

The next community in which I pastored was extremely skeptical of the genuineness of Christian faith as modeled by the

pastor. They were a part of the professional class that only spent a little time in the town and then moved on to “greener” pasture, or so it was supposed. And, it so happened that it was true. Therefore, I was obliged to live my faith very openly by practicing the practical things of ministry. Rather than do only visitation, I sought opportunity to interact with the people “by all possible means” (I Cor. 9:22, NIV). This included the building or repair of household items, sewing machine repair (there was no shop in town), repairing autos for the needy, yard work and house work for those who were unable to perform those duties. Also, running the local funeral home provided a much needed ministry opportunity. In addition, regular visits to the hospital, jail, and nursing home were coupled with serving on community service committees. Once per week I took the infirm around the community for a van ride to see the flowers and anything new to keep them in touch with their surroundings, and arranged for them to eat an ice-cream cone while on the ride. This was a good way to utilize the church van, which happened to be an old airport shuttle bus with nice big windows. (I wired it with a CD boombox that was powered from the battery terminal, and set up some big speakers so that when we sat and watched glaciers and sea life in the water they could listen to polkas, country western, southern gospel, etc.). For many, these were little things that made the difference in their lives between sanity and insanity. Small town living can become claustrophobic at times, particularly in the dark winter months.

No doubt, the average person will not be able to keep up the pace with all of the goodwill gestures and demands placed upon them to minister to folks who may *never* come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. This began to dawn upon me in the very earliest stages of my career. I needed to understand to whom and to what I was called. Jesus taught that His children were to be changed from the inside out. My life should always reflect His nature regardless of circumstances. To reach out to grasp this ideal in one’s own strength is impossible, but to allow Christ to make these things a part of one’s life, my life, is/was the answer. My nature could only keep up the pace for a short period of time, yet if I submitted to God’s nature....

Finally, a person needs to delegate as much responsibility as the congregation can handle. That is, if there are persons in the body who are able to learn or capable of carrying forth a work,

then those persons should be given the tools needed as long as they are willing and at least somewhat eager. Many times there simply is no one who is willing or able to work in the ministrations of the church. This leaves an overwhelming sense of duty to perform on the shoulders of the pastor who knows and sees the tremendous needs to be filled in the community. Nevertheless, the pastor is only as good as his strength and personal presentation. When he or she is “burned out” from overactivity he/she ceases to be as effective as God would have one to be. I personally have experienced this problem on two distinct occasions—once in each of the churches I pastored. On both occasions, I had to learn and relearn the concept of “resting” in our Lord and Savior. I found the scripture in Ephesians 6:10-18 very helpful in that I was enlightened as to its meaning, which was far apart from the doctrinal, or common, interpretation in my denominational teaching. The “full armor of God” is not just a fancy two-step for doing battle with the devil, or some mystical formula for beating evil spirits at their game. It is real live ammunition for the battle that rages within each and every person’s mind and heart over the issues of relationship with God. Where is salvation? What is truth? What of righteousness? How can one be always at the ready? Who can give the sword? Is praying “in the Spirit” praying in tongues, or is it praying in the mind/heart/will of God the Father? Better yet, where did I fit into this scripture, or did I even know anymore about that which I proclaimed and preached? No. I began to be aware once again by whom I was saved. Jesus is the way the truth and the life. My weapon is His word and how it applies to me. I am righteous because of the dedication of my life to Him. Righteousness is holiness. The Spirit of God is that “in” which I am to pray—with His thoughts and intentions not mine. And when all of these things are in their proper place in my life, and I come up with a good idea to reach the community by example or outreach or testimony (or whatever label one wishes to place upon it), I do all I know how to do and then stand. Stability within one’s own character speaks loud and clear to not only oneself, but also to the congregation and community. It reflects a trait of God-likeness, who does not change daily depending on the emotion of the moment. Malphurs (1998) says, “In ministry God uses men and women who are willing to risk failure” (p.73). This is very true, but we mustn’t mope about when those failures are

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experienced. When mistakes are made, make the appropriate corrections and apologies, then move on.

It is often thought that if a person is naturally a small town person, that is, born and raised and living in a small town, then that person is comfortable with small-town living. This is not necessarily true. Also, there is a stereotype attached to anyone who comes from a small town as being a “hick” or redneck, or even not as intelligent as people from larger population areas. This also is not necessarily true. For myself, I have been indoctrinated (imposed upon from others) with the attitude that if a person is from a small town then his ministry should be to small-town folks. There is, then, with this general feeling, no future for that individual away from the small-town ministry and atmosphere due to the stereotype imposed upon him or her. Although many would deny this allegation, this certainly has been my experience—even having been denied pastoral positions in the larger city because I have never had the “experience” of ministering in the city. So I have seen this principle at work: The ones who would accuse small-town folks of being narrow-minded, unbending, rigid, or even red-necked, are themselves perhaps more inclined to be of that attitude than the very ones whom they accuse.

There is a middle ground for me when considering the ideal position in which to pastor. I mentioned earlier that we (my family and I) had lived in a community that had an assortment of individuals from all parts of the country, and all types of backgrounds. This community was neither small nor large in its attitudes and character. It was progressive, yet controlled; growth oriented, but contained; home-town friendly, but respectful of individual privacy. However, it is not always possible to have the “ideal” situation in which one can pastor. So, one takes what he or she knows and applies it to the circumstances that befalls them. This is what I did in the small towns I pastored. I know what works with the people to gain their respect. I know how they view the professional class. I know the depth of politicking that consumes them. I know the style of mass communication used. These things have already been discussed here, but I must tell one more short story to emphasize my point.

As a Christian, and pastor, I have always been concerned with the impression I leave with the community or individuals. Not that I allow others to dictate my lifestyle, but they help me to



be aware of my relationship with Christ by that iron-sharpening-iron effect. My son was entering the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in a new school and was the new preacher's kid at our first pastorate. This was not a pretty situation for him, and he bears some unfortunate scars as a result of our tenure there. As is typical of this scenario, there was a group of kids who were headed by the local bully. The bully chose my son as a tormenting point. I listened to his complaints, we prayed that God in His mercy would eliminate the problem, and sent him back to school. This went on for quite some time and much of what happened was not reported to me or my wife. (Only now do we know more, although we may never know the full story). After apparently several months of pure hell for him, I became angry and told him he had to stand up to this boy. The reasoning was not something that I held lightly, but found through studying the life of David and knowing the small-town mindset. My son would have to fight to gain respect from the school's students. He was the laughingstock of the school. I told him to fight, showed him what to do to this boy, and be prepared to lose physically but gain emotionally and in confidence of himself. He would reap the reward of respectability and, therefore, a solid Christian witness that not all Christians were wimps. The Jesus we serve is no sissy, and neither are those who truly reflect His glory. He fought and lost. The teacher pulled the bully off him thus preventing my son from being choked to death, and my son was the hero with the students. The bully lost his ability to intimidate without consequences, and was no longer the "great leader" he had long maintained. My son has great confidence in his own abilities today and is not intimidated by the adult bullies in our modern world. He knows His Lord and what is expected of him.

I would not trade my past experiences for anything in the world for I have had the privilege of living in both systems. I would say that, overall, there are people in all walks of life and in all geographic locations, small town and large, that have any number of opinions and attitudes. However, I feel I have a better view of the nature of pastoring the small community and how it relates to those seeking leadership positions in small churches than what is taught generally in our nation's schools of Christian education. There are other men and women who could equally disclose the information within this article, but, for unknown reasons, they have not written a vast array of material on the

subject.

The world is hungering for pastors who know how to be real with people. Healthy congregations are not looking for a song and dance man who can do everything, but they are looking for someone who can care for them and do the things that Christ would do. Talk to them without judgment; offer physical assistance and not cheap prayers; to be a man who loves the Lord; one who can do manly things, yet, be as gentle as a loving mother. Although I have been a small-town man for most of my life, I find that I still struggle with some of the idiosyncrasies found in the small community. Some things only now do I understand with a more scientific mind. Some things I will never understand. I know that each person must confront his or her own shortcomings as I have done and am still doing, and seriously ask if small town living is for them. The key word in one's search for placement is "healthy." Is the church and/or community healthy, and, if not, can you go there and survive? Count the cost. Take the plunge. Pastoring in the small community is a profession on the cutting edge of life.

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