

“THE SMALL OR RURAL CHURCH”

August 7, 2019

NALC Mission Festival-Indianapolis, Indiana

Lesson: Luke 10:38-42 (Mary & Martha, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”)

What are some of the distractions that we face as Small, Rural churches that prevent us from our mission of being and making disciples of Jesus Christ in our contexts?

- Consolidation (Schools, Medical, Funeral Homes, etc.)
- Declining Population
- Aging Facilities/Repairs
- Finances
- Inward Focus
- Rural/Small Church is a “Stepping Stone” for Pastors before they move on to “Bigger and Better” things (larger congregations, national church staff position, etc.)
- Lack of support from previous denominational affiliation which led to a lack of trust
- “Bigger is Better” belief that we hear at conferences, read in books, etc. that tell us larger churches are doing “real ministry” and the small or rural church isn’t making a difference
- Others?

Many of these distractions can lead us into a natural desire to enter into “Maintenance Ministry” where we seek to:

- Prevent further financial or membership losses (“We can’t do that because people might not like it and we can’t afford to lose members)
- Tolerate dysfunctional activity in the congregation (We can’t afford to lose any more members, so we have to tolerate this person’s behavior)
- Inward Focus (what keeps us happy)
- Unrealistic view of the community (longing for what was instead of embracing our current reality)
- Belief that “everyone goes to church”-We just have to keep the doors open and they’ll come
- Outreach is the Pastor’s/Pastor’s Spouse’s/Church Staff’s Job
- Maintaining old programming models that don’t fit with our realities in 2019. (Ladies Aid meetings during the day when many of our women work during the day, youth activity that competes with sports/school events, etc.)

Just as Jesus was present in Mary and Martha’s home in Bethany, He is present in our congregations today through the means of Word and Sacrament ministry. He is there for a purpose: He longs to give us the gifts of forgiveness of our sins and eternal life in His Father’s kingdom! Christ is present in our congregations through the Word and Sacraments to equip us for our everyday lives and ministries! He is with us in our smaller congregations calling us to lives of discipleship, where our old sinful selves are drowned and we are raised up to new life in Christ Jesus! The doors of your small and rural church are open today for a reason! There is a reason nearly 3 out of every 4 congregations in the NALC are small town or rural churches. We are important in making disciples of all nations!

Throughout the New Testament, the Church grew through small, personal relationships!
-John 1 -Jesus calls Philip to discipleship. In his joy of finding Jesus, he shares the good news with Nathaniel. Nathaniel asks "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was a small blip on the map, a rural, insignificant place that didn't hold much, if any, influence. In response, Philip says to Nathaniel "come and see". Nathaniel at this personal invitation has his life-changing encounter with Jesus, who tells him "You will see greater things than these."

-Parable of the mustard seed. Mustard seed starts small, yet grows into a mighty plant.

-New Testament Church in Acts 1-2. They start with 11. By the time we get to the end of Acts 1, there are 120. At Pentecost, having only the Word and Sacrament, the church grows as 3,000 people hear the Word, believe and are baptized. The Lord adds to their number day by day as they grow in discipleship, meet together, again, with only the Word and Sacraments to go on.

-House churches in the New Testament

God often uses the small, insignificant things to do mighty things in the life of His Kingdom!

This can happen in our small and/or rural churches today!

Small churches can:

- Know one another deeply
- Provide support during difficult times in life
- Intergenerational relationships (sometimes replacing relationships that are missing in our lives)
- Mentoring in the faith
- Do some things well than trying to be all things to all people and fail miserably
- A perfect place for Life-to-Life Discipleship to take root