

The endurance of rural congregations

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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The

little rural church I serve, along with two other retired clergy, has two dozen members, if you carefully count everyone whether there or not. No one is young. The church growth gang (now called church transformation) calls it a declining and dying congregation. The thing is, it's been there for over a hundred years and has never had more than a couple dozen members. People come, people go, people die, people come. Now and then it has tolerated clergy attempting to be full time, but, for the most part, it has got along fine with a long line of supply clergy.

Right

now they have the services of three experienced, well respected pastors who provide both continuity and variety. A skeptical colleague wondered out loud about how long they will last when we are gone. My guess is at least another hundred years. Fifty years before I came on the scene they were served by a local professor who was also an Episcopal priest. Others have included clergy skilled in mission work, new clergy trying out their wings, another professor, and even a high church priest who may have been the only one who knew what to do with a manipule.

That's

all be beside the point. Small rural congregations don't really depend on seminary educated clergy. It's nice to have them, but not a necessity. They don't even depend on a flow of new families with young children. They do depend on the economic viability of the towns they are in. Dying towns beget dying congregations. But if a town can sustain itself, an otherwise healthy, small rural congregation will just keep on going. It has more to do with the spirit of the place and the

Spirit that fills it than with experts on church growth and transformation.

What

might be the nature of that Spirit filled spirit? From what I can tell, it is the genuine love and care between members, and for the community, that transcend the petty irritants of small town life in which there are no secrets. It's the joy of worshiping whether with or without music. It's the making of parish decisions, sometimes with more than a little contention, right in the midst of a Sunday morning service. It's the embrace of whomever comes in the door, no matter who they are, with a naive lack of awareness that their embrace may be more than a stranger desires or can stand. It's the genuine concern for others in the community who are suffering or in need.

It

requires one more thing. It requires an openness to a subtle indwelling of the Holy Spirit. By subtle presence I mean an atmosphere of the Spirit's presence, unseen and unheard, yet there. I don't think you can make that happen whether by loud proclamation or through sophisticated consulting.

A small rural congregation without that subtle presence may indeed be declining and dying, and we have all seen that happen. One with that subtle presence will probably continue from generation to generation as long as there are generations to be had.

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