When small-town pastors put down roots

The ministry of abiding, even in the face of decline, is an offering to God.

by Brad Roth in the August 15, 2018 issue

Cross outside Hanston Mennonite Church, Hodgeman County, Kansas. Photo by Brad Roth.

I pull into the tiny town of Bloom in western Kansas, tires crunching gravel like war rubble, and step out beside the paired ruins of the Bloom School and the Lighthouse Baptist Church. All that's left of the school is its prodigious concrete arch, cracked foundation slabs, and some rebar gnarling the air. The church is just a stone front and back. A sign over the door reads: Bloom Youth Center. But do not enter—the roof caved in long ago.

Bloom's devastation came slowly. The school consolidated in nearby Minneola in the 1960s, and the post office closed in 1992. Now the gas station is boarded up, the words "no trespassing" scrawled next to a wobbly, spray-painted heart. The only business left is a grain elevator. Bloom represents the extreme end of the decline

many rural communities face—and fear.

Not every rural place finds itself in such grim circumstances. Some communities—such as Moundridge, Kansas, where I live—have defied the narrative of decline, holding steady or even growing. But for every Moundridge there are 100 Blooms: tiny communities with populations in the triple or double digits and falling. They're no-stoplight towns that can scarcely support a mom-and-pop grocery store. A big-city reporter commented to me once, "There's really no reason for a lot of these communities to exist." Many residents have apparently come to the same conclusion, voting with their feet by leaving.

I set out to discover ways that the church can be a beacon of hope in tiny, often shrinking communities. Along the way, I talked to pastors and leaders who are proclaiming hope by abiding in place, working for the good of the whole community, and testifying to a God who is greater than their present circumstances. Hope might seem like just a bromide—after all, the church is in no position to fix the problems rural communities face. But the hope of biblical faith is robust. It is born in displacement and nurtured in slavery, fired in warfare and loss, and given its distinctive cruciform shape in Jesus. And just as Abraham hoped for the future fulfillment of God's promise and yet saw the birth of Ishmael and Isaac, so too the church's hope looks to the future but is grounded in the present.

In our society, moving on generally means moving up. We move for family or education or work or a better view. Remaining in a place—especially if it's small and rural—looks like getting stuck. But the biblical story challenges this narrative of movement and progress. Jesus proclaims his world-vaulting message to a small area around Galilee. He never sails for Athens or Rome, and he's only in Jerusalem just long enough to overturn a few tables and antagonize the powers that be. He connects with a specific people at a specific time.

Jesus models the art of abiding, and abiding is one of the most basic ways that pastors and congregations proclaim hope in declining rural communities. To abide is to remain—with a sense of commitment to all that God is doing in a particular place. It's seeing ourselves as called to a place by the God who loves the whole creation. Abiding is learning to love a people and a place, and then living that love out through steadfast commitment over time.

Population size and economic wealth don’t sum up the worth of a place. When we start to take this to heart, we can try something radical: living there. We might ground our presence in the theological language of incarnation and solidarity, but it all comes down to the vote of confidence we give by showing up and staying put. It’s a fundamentally hopeful act.

Jason McConnell is a pastor who serves two congregations in Franklin, Vermont, a community of a little over 1,000 people near the border with Quebec. He tells me about his far-flung colleagues’ surprise when they hear about his ministry setting. “What are you doing in a place like that?” they ask. In contrast, many of them have been working their denominations’ career ladders, moving up to larger congregations.

It’s not a question of qualifications. McConnell is convinced that rural churches deserve the best. He holds M.Div., Th.M., and D.Min. degrees. He teaches classes on best practices in rural ministry through the Rural Home Missionary Association out of Morton, Illinois. “I want to have the highest credentials absolutely possible and then to give my life to a little rural church like this,” he says. And he’s in it for the long haul. “I keep telling them that I’m here for forty years,” he says. “They still don’t believe me.”

McConnell is deeply invested in the life of the community. He serves on the local school board, as an EMT, and as a ski instructor at the school. McConnell prefers to spend afternoons working out of a local coffee shop where he can connect with people.

McConnell’s long-term commitment to his community is a powerful sign of the gospel. It’s staying put as an act of hope and love. And it’s not an easy thing to do. Our society’s narratives of success are powerful and persistent. Skilled pastors start in rural congregations. They don’t often stay there.

And yet, I’ve encountered pastors and leaders practicing the art of abiding in tiny and sometimes dying communities and congregations. Like McConnell, many of them live out their commitment to abide by working for the good of the whole community.

Staying is one way that pastors provide hope in declining rural areas.

During the announcement time at Journey @ Yoder, a satellite congregation of the thriving Journey Mennonite Church, pastor Philip Kauffman reminds the gathering of mostly young families and children about an upcoming community meeting they are hosting. The plan is to join with other congregations, including several Amish communities, to discuss possibilities for attracting a medical doctor to the area. Yoder, along with its nearby sister town of Haven, is located some 20 minutes outside of the city of Hutchinson, Kansas. While many people can drive to the city for medical services, the distance is an inconvenience, especially for horse-and-buggy Amish families.

Convening community meetings like this fits with Journey's vision. Kauffman and the rest of the pastoral team (there are three pastors, all part-time) have emphasized working for the good of the community. It's the way they do ministry. For instance, when the Haven fall festival wraps up, the Journey congregation gathers with others at 8 a.m. to tidy up the town. After refueling on donuts and coffee, several local congregations celebrate a combined community worship service. They worship and pick up trash.

In many ways, Journey's pastors are striving to live out the apostle Paul's vision in Galatians 6:10, where he instructs the church to "work for the good of all, especially for the family of faith." They're not alone. In my conversations with rural pastors and leaders, community solidarity rises to the top as a common factor in thriving rural congregations. People are involved in the school and connected through nonprofits. They serve on boards. They participate in city government. They volunteer and coach and teach. They have a vision for the good of the whole community.

Thad Hinkle, a pastor in north-central Kansas, describes how his ministry mind-set has evolved. When Hinkle first began serving the Mankato Christian Church, he moved into the pastor's office and waited for people to bring their problems to him. But after two weeks of being sequestered behind the desk, Hinkle decided his approach wasn't working. "I realized that I had to get out of the office or I wouldn't see anyone," he says. "And my sermons got better because I started to see where people are living."

In recent years, Hinkle has gotten involved in running the local movie theater. He describes what happened when the original theater went out of business. A community group formed to reopen it as an all-volunteer nonprofit. Hinkle puts up new movie posters, handles tickets, and occasionally sells concessions. While

pumping palm-oil butter over a tub of popcorn might not be a discipleship moment, it’s a recognition of the community’s entertainment needs—needs that can be harder to meet in a rural area.

Community involvement like Hinkle’s is a concrete expression of love of neighbor and neighborhood. But it’s also a validation of the community’s future. It’s a claim made with blood, sweat, and popcorn butter that the church is invested in the future of the community.

Yet no one can predict what the future will bring for many rural communities.

Near Mankato, the town of Formoso, Kansas (population 70), faces a steep demographic slide that has lasted decades, compounded by a particularly acute economic hollowing-out that has left the tiny community with a disproportionately older and poorer population. The town is dotted with houses that have been rented to low-income families by absentee landlords, allowed to slip into disrepair, and then abandoned. It’s a challenging situation with no easy solution.

Daniel Waide is the young pastor of the Formoso Community Church, a congregation of about 30 people and the only church in town. While Waide recognizes the difficulties faced by Formoso, he hasn’t lost heart. “As long as there’s people here,” he says, “there are things that we need to do.”

Waide describes his ministry as full time in the community, though “not necessarily in the church.” He grabs coffee at the public library, eats at the local diner, rides in the tractor alongside farmers, and connects with people throughout the week. His wife, Kimberly, is involved in the garden club and in local homeschool groups. Their congregation has experimented with a community breakfast to extend an invitation into a community in which Waide estimates some three-fourths of the population have no church ties.

Like people, communities find their reason to exist in reference to God.

While there have been some new people who have connected to the church in his two years serving in Formoso, Waide is motivated by a vision beyond whatever success he may or may not achieve in his congregation. He says, “Our hope is yet to come. I found out a long time ago that the work I do in this community is not just for the community. I view my work as an offering to God.”

This outlook may be the secret ingredient in serving rural congregations: a steadfast sense that our work is an offering to God. Without this conviction, pastors all too easily fall prey to our society's disordered values, which privilege growing things and disparage weakness and dying. The possibility that ministry could be carried out faithfully and well in congregations and communities clearly on the decline just doesn't fit.

Towns like Formoso have been drying up across the Great Plains for years. The hope of the church, while anchored in the present moment, must lie beyond the horizons of small-town demographic trends. Christian hope never promises any particular earthly outcome but rather looks forward to its ultimate fulfillment in God. According to the biblical vision that culminates in the book of Revelation, the world will be mended, the old wounds of injustice healed. Despite all the violent indications to the contrary, history is being drawn inexorably to God's good end.

But in the meantime, things fall apart.

No doubt this already/not-yet tension is why the apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians to do their work with an eye to the promises of God. "In the Lord your labor is not in vain," he writes (1 Corinthians 15:58). Hope in God infuses day-to-day work with meaning.

LaVernia Peters, Formoso's mayor and chief lawn mower, speaks of a hope shaped by her involvement in the Formoso Community Church. It's not easy to keep a town like Formoso going. Many of Formoso's biggest challenges are unfixable. Peters deals with what she can. For instance, she and others raise vegetables in a community garden plot and sell their produce at a local market stand. The proceeds go to improve the community: fixing potholes or recoating the floor of the roller-skating rink. Says Peters of her hope: "It's the only thing that keeps you going."

Hope is what keeps us going. Perhaps it's not so different for congregations in burgeoning cities and suburbs. If we aren't anchored in something bigger than our present circumstance—hope, some sense of mission, and ultimately God—then our work becomes just one thing after another, the minor flywheel serving its little mechanical end. We need some sense that our life and labor are ordered toward something greater than ourselves, no matter where we live.

This may also be the reason that tiny, declining rural communities like Bloom and Formoso should exist at all. It's the same reason any community exists, from Kansas

City to Jerusalem. It’s not their economic value, artistic production, or architectural splendor. Like people, communities find their reason to exist in reference to God. They exist because God has graced them into being through love. And that is enough.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Pastors who stay.”