

Churches Minister to Rural Schools

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Traffic patterns, even on country roads, have changed in the past few days. Children now gather at bus stops waiting to be carried off to school, so one may need to stop the car behind the big yellow bus.

One's mind may wander across the years to when he or she made a similar trip to town and to school. It may even focus on certain good and bad times during those days.

We will probably find time one evening soon to view again the movie "October Sky." It is a heart-warming tale of high school boys growing up in a poor West Virginia coal-mining town in the 1950s. Captivated by the space program and encouraged by a teacher, they experimented with rockets. However, the central figure experiences conflict with his father, a practical man, who thinks that the future of his son is in the mines, not in rocket science. The boys win the national science fair, and most of them go on to college, find good urban jobs and become "successful." Father and son are reconciled.

When I wait behind a school bus, I pray for the children. I read and hear about the many problems they must face in today's schools. And while I reject the myth that schools in the 1950s were some kind of utopia (which is not as I experienced them from both sides of the teacher's desk), I must not simply "blow off" the many problems that today's children and youth face.

Things do not seem to be good in our schools. They have many wonderful technological resources, but discipline, commitment to learning and a biblical philosophy of life are often missing.

In rural areas, where the scale of life is still manageable and where teachers and administrators often share a pew with us on Sunday, there are some simple things we can do to deal with problems in public education. And they don't require constitutional amendments and confrontational crusades.

Here are some efforts taken by churches in my area:

Prayer Walks. For the past several years as many as 1,000 people—five percent of the total population of the area—have gone to the campuses when school commences to conduct prayer walks for the students, faculty, administrators and staff. Many churches continue to remember the schools and the students in prayer as part of their worship and prayer services each week.

Crisis Response Teams. Pastors and church leaders from several denominations are trained and on call to respond to any crisis in any school in our county. We were called twice last year when teenagers died in accidents. It made a difference.

Youth Events. Our association sponsors many youth events for praise, worship and inspiration. These are well-attended and very effective.

School Religious Clubs. Youth are encouraged to develop organizations that will provide a Christian presence in the high schools.

Squad Sunday. One of our churches holds this at the beginning of each school year. It is a growing event and is supported by the coaches in the schools. Three hundred attended this year and 50 made decisions for Christ.

See You at the Pole. The ministerial associations are supporting this event each fall. Then in the spring one town holds a "block party" rally on the eve of the "National Day of Prayer" event.

College Bible Study. Each week this summer, current college students met at the associational office. One focus was to reach those who would enter college this fall and equip them for living as Christians in their new setting.

Clustering. I see a growing cooperation among churches and youth groups to cooperate in having good events for youth during the school year, beginning with gatherings after the football games this fall.

Mission Activities. Many youth have been involved in mission trips and activities this past summer. This should help them to live the Christian life.

Churches Honoring the Youth. Many churches have taken steps to promote and support intellectual advancement among the students they serve. Some offer scholarships to graduating seniors.

Many of us, whether rural or metropolitan dwellers, need to heed the warning of the late French thinker Jacques Ellul. He pointed out that modern culture tends to confuse knowledge of technology and technique with wisdom.

The task of Christian parents and churches is to proclaim the "wisdom" that lies beyond the knowledge of technology and technique. God is the creator, sustainer and finisher of history. The biblical understanding of history frames the great wisdom within which any knowledge should be placed.

We must not spend all of our time and resources trying to change national policies and "get God back in the schools." That really didn't work in previous centuries. Let's focus on telling children and youth "the rest of the story."

And let us demonstrate in our lives the difference that believing in God as the Lord of history means. This is doable in many rural places in America. So pray. Make plans. Be positive. Find colleagues. Do it.

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