

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH RURAL CHURCHES

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Recently a copy of *The Country Preacher* came into my hands. I was impressed that its advice continues to ring true, although 65 years have passed since it was first published.

Jeff Ray, the author, taught preaching and rural sociology at Southwestern Seminary for many years. Writing in the mid-1920s for the Sunday School Board, Ray found rural America to be in the throes of significant change—change that was destroying people and crippling churches and communities. He identified leadership—pastoral leadership—as the crucial need for the rural church.

In addressing the need for leadership, the first characteristic Ray looked to is the *person* of the rural pastor. To lead, he must, Ray declared, have a strong and vigorous body. And he should not be afraid to get his hands dirty. He continued that the rural pastor needed to be well-educated. Two reasons are cited: his congregation is becoming better educated, and he must deal with the residual effects of superstition and prejudice.

Another point Ray made about the person of the rural pastor is that he must be both orthodox in his doctrinal teachings and progressive in his church program and in his community activities. Ray called this a "sane conservatism." It seems that he is declaring that the rural pastor must earn the trust of his people, a trust grounded in real biblical faith, if he is to get his rural congregation to follow him in progressive programs, projects, and activities.

As the second characteristic, Ray addressed the *attitude* of the rural pastor. He stressed that the pastor must see the tremendous importance and the essential dignity of the rural pastorate. Too often, he sees himself as "just a country preacher," missing the challenging mission to which God has called him. Ray argued that since the rural pastor often ministers to a small congregation over a period of years, he will have opportunity to impact the lives of persons intensely.

The third characteristic noted by Professor Ray as essential to the effective rural pastor is wholehearted *consecration* to the task. Ray encouraged the pastors to be students of not only Scripture, but rural social science and the practical art of organizing and doing church work also.

As one contemporary director of missions puts it, "We need to grow beyond the Crop Duster Preacher, one who swoops in on Sunday and drops his load, to that of Caring Shepherd who cares for the flock and develops the church. We continue to have too many churches that lurch along in a rut because they lack appropriate and trained leadership."¹

Building upon these pillars of personhood, attitude, and commitment, Ray identified

¹Quote attributed to Dean Hodges, director of missions, Washington Baptist Association, Milledgeville, Georgia.

additional issues in the church and the community that the effective country pastor should address in his leadership—facilities, program, organization, community and world service.

Ray declared that the church building should be stable, usable, beautiful, and comfortable. It should have ample grounds with adequate parking.

Ray identified the basic functions of the church—worship, evangelism, education, and ministry. He called for well-designed programs, events, and projects that address each of these functions.

The lack of budgeting, calendaring, and intentional planning and strategy, to Ray's mind, weakened the rural church. So he called for the country pastor to address these issues. Further, the church should be organized in order to achieve its program of work. As programs are adopted and projects and events designed, the appropriate structure should be put in place and trained to get the work done.

Finally, Ray contended that the church should provide leadership for the community in addressing its needs. He saw it championing good roads, good schools, and progressive agricultural practices. He also declared that the church should address the needs of the world through the missions program of Southern Baptists.

The counsel provided by Uncle Jeff in *The Country Preacher* is relevant because many of the problems he identified are still present. I hope you will allow the insights of this wise teacher to focus your understanding, activities, and strategies in the rural church that you seek to lead under God.