
**PRACTICING CARE IN RURAL CONGREGATIONS
AND COMMUNITIES.** By Jeanne Hoeft, L. Shannon Jung,
and Joretta Marshall. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. 183
pages

A 2014 Top Ten Book

My first call to ministry was to a two-church field in a rural area. I suspect that many newly ordained seminary graduates began with a call to serve in a rural area. At that time there was very little written for ministry in rural areas, especially in pastoral care. What was written was dated and not at all useful. There were a few "Town and Country" gatherings and these were helpful to those who attended. Many of us had to go it on our own. Thankfully, that situation has changed for the better. More resources are available, including mentors for new rural pastors or small town pastors. This book is likely the best available resource in recent history.

The authors note that over half of all churches in the United States are in small towns and rural areas across the country, not in cities." Then, they state the purpose of their book: "rural churches and communities are different from the norm, uniquely particular in context, and hold particular wisdom from which the rest of the church might profit." The authors further point out that "pastoral care in these places is challenged by physical isolation, lack of anonymity, changing economic realities of family farming, and the expectation that small town pastors should be active community leaders in addition to pastoral caregivers" (p. 2).

These conditions in rural and in small towns led the Louisville Institute Pastoral Leadership to fund a project that brought together the leading groups advocating for rural ministry. There were also seven rural pastors included in the study. *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* is the result of that two year study. The three authors are teachers in denominational seminaries and ordained clergy who have served as pastors in local congregations. I suppose that there are others who could have written on ministry in rural and small town ministry, but I believe that these authors may not be surpassed in knowledge and experience on this topic.

Four themes are developed in the book which interact together and give substance to the book as a whole. The themes are: "Care is shaped by place," context; "Care engages community of different kinds;" "Pastoral care and public leadership intersect;" and "Care responds to the multiple diversities in community." Pastoral care is defined in this book as "to actively respond to and engage each other in life journeys in ways that lead to increased love and justice in the world." It is especially true when applied to persons and structures in rural areas and small towns (p. 8). The discussion of pastoral care and the way in which such care is practiced thickens the topics, deepens the case studies, and issues a challenge for ministry. The first section of the book consists of four chapters which further develop these four themes.

The second section of the book, containing four chapters, demonstrated how the four guiding themes shape pastoral care in the particular situation of poverty, violence and illness. Such problems are certainly not unique to rural areas and small towns. Yet the context of these problems in rural areas and small towns place unique stresses, unusual challenges and hopeful options for pastoral care not always found in urban areas.

The book concludes with a chapter on "Learning from

Rural Communities and Congregations.”□This chapter is for those who disdain the rural church and small town ministry. It is the reminder and affirmation that ministry in small “place” brings certain rewards, and as such, is a gift to the church at large.

Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities is an important word to faith communities as well as to individuals. It brings the best of social and cultural thinking to the reader. In addition the book is grounded in theology and written by pastors and those with pastoral care experience. And, it is written in a style that engages the reader. Therefore, it is a primer for those new to rural areas and small towns as well as for those who have a special call to small church ministry.

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