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

A reviewer's confessional: I grew up on a rural  
southeast Kansas farm. We felt lucky to break even some  
years. I know firsthand the context of rural poverty, with a

lack of sustainable, livable wage jobs “in town.” Our little community had the undercurrent of domestic violence, the surge of rural depopulation, and the persistent worry about the dearth of “local” healthcare providers. My formative years of the 1980s and 1990s were not easy, living in the micro what was happening in the macro, as the wave of negative changes overcame many American farm families. Small towns and rural counties point to such times as when those “beginning of the end” feelings started to feel palpable as they struggled to reinvent their economic identities.

With my young adult years spent away in college and seminary, it could be argued that I left home in order to have a livelihood. I counter that my upbringing prepared me to be a better pastor to those God has called me to serve in rural Kansas, rural Vermont (where great wealth and deep poverty could be found along the same mountain road), and now with the regional ministry of the American Baptist Churches of New York State. Around “upstate New York”, you encounter great diversity as well as some of our country’s places of deep economic challenge. The states I have lived in may be widely varied politically (in the “red/blue” sense), yet the rural challenges have remained much too familiar wherever I lived and ministered. Nonetheless, with a down economy and globalization, many in rural America are struggling, though perhaps in ways still obscure to the understanding of the urbanized American populace.

I share this biographical note so that my praise for *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* can be heard more clearly. The authors serve in the fields of pastoral theology, pastoral care and rural or “Town and Country” ministries, teaching seminarians the skills and sensitivities necessary for ministering in places with less profile than our secret dreams of placement in the “right church with the right everything” allow us to imagine. The picture this book paints of rural ministry is not one of easy reward or Keillor’s Wobegon. Instead, the authors engage the reader in the world(s) of rural congregations and communities, providing a framework for pastoral reflectivity and sensitivity. Each chapter begins with an engaging case study, which allows the reader a first glimpse into the studied response needed to engage the complexities often overlooked in rural communities by persons who imagine “things out here are simpler.” One needs theology, pastoral care and no small measure of “horse sense” (as we say back home) to minister in situations where problems are deep and comprehensive support services are miles, and sometimes entire counties away.

The book would be quite helpful for clergy learning to “translate” ministry skills and life experience for a rural ministry setting. Learning to live within the tight-knit community of a small town or with the speed at which gossip travels can be exasperating when more accustomed to the relative anonymity of a more densely populated area. When in less populated communities or remote places, you enter into a much different world that is not represented as

such in popular culture or economic realities rarely privileged among the socio-economic affluent shaping state and federal laws and policy. For example, the tussle over the SNAP program benefits delayed the Farm Bill's passage in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Farm families were placed in peril twice over: facing cuts to agricultural support programs and in turn access to SNAP helping put food on the table in some arguably bad years for crop yields.

Entering into the "world(s)" of rural America, the authors have found four concepts helpful to understanding rural ministry: care shaped by place, engaging the community, intersecting with leadership (and the styles of leadership you often find) and responding to diversity. The authors claim the bedrock of this book is when the pastoral caregiver engages in "a diagnosis of one's context; [we must realize] one style does not fit all" (p. 71). Such good advice should be well heeded. We know of many circumstances of colleagues (and perhaps even ourselves) have failed to take this word to heart.

Developing each concept in the first section of chapters, the authors enable pastors to see more perceptively the issues unique to rural congregations and communities. Building upon these skills, the authors engage the reader in various common challenges in the second section. Chapters engage the reader in issues of "rural poverty, class and care," "rural violence," "rural health," and how to keep engaged in such reflective and reflexive learning.

For example, a pastor is told a parish couple is involved in a domestic violence situation. In closer-knit communities, the victim has more obstacles accessing services or finding safe harbor when "everybody knows everybody" or friendships and kinships interweave among first responders, local authorities and social workers. How does the pastor keep confidences, help advocate for the victim and move carefully through the tapestry of relationships inevitably webbed around any tense situation? The authors help rural ministers formulate strategies calibrated to the realities of living in close-knit communities, let alone the family-size churches (worship attendance under 65) that are most common in rural America. Clergy for whom urban areas are more normative would be wise to pay close attention to the opening chapters as the authors provide a framework for understanding pastoral care "shaped by place."

In reading this book, I found myself recalling my own ministry experiences. In some cases, I felt affirmed that I had intuited positive pastoral care strategies sensitive to the matters at hand. In other situations, I wish I had read this book a decade ago when I was just starting out in ministry. For seminary classrooms such a book is needed for the 501 Pastoral Care type courses, as rural ministry is a likely context for many "new to ministry" seminarians and lay studies-track clergy. For pastoral collegiality groups, the book will serve as a helpful conversation starter and enhance our abilities to serve in the places God calls us.

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