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Spiritual Care in Sparsely Populated Regions

Robin Haensel

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Core Question

What insights might be gained from this region with respect to opportunities that may exist to provide spiritual care with, and for, those in similar sparsely populated regions and what innovative ways might be used to deliver that spiritual care?

Project Abstract

Population loss in rural areas of Saskatchewan, and indeed across Canada, creates a challenging reality for those who remain behind. As rural populations dwindle there is also an accompanying loss of villages and towns along with businesses that served those population centers. This has created a crisis for those who continue to live and work in increasing isolation. Small town grocery stores, financial institutions, agricultural suppliers of all kinds, schools and health care facilities have closed in great numbers over the past thirty years, along with local churches that provided spiritual care to the community. Denominational leaders tried to meet the need for spiritual care by developing multi-point pastoral charges in areas of dwindling population, but, in recent years, many of these multi-point ministries have closed.

The question that drove the research and writing of my D.Min. project revolved around the loss of organized local churches in rural areas of western Canada, and specifically Saskatchewan. Through the early stages of the project's development, under the guidance and encouragement of my D.Min. cohort, my faculty advisor and my project advisor, my project area was narrowed down from an initial area of 12,000 km² covering much of west-central Saskatchewan to an area of approximately 1,900 km² covering the Rural Municipality (R.M.) of Lacadena in west-central Saskatchewan.

Introduction

I was born in Elrose, Saskatchewan during the mid-20th Century. I grew up, went to school and spent my early working years in that town of approximately 500 people, during the time between the end of World War II and the rapid rise of technology that has become common place in our present age. I experienced bustling rural towns and villages in my early years, and witnessed the rapid decline of those same towns and villages as a young adult.

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Much of my pastoral ministry was in rural settings and, in my current role, I serve 75 churches, the vast majority of which are classified as rural.

During my research, I came to the realization that the term "rural" has many definitions not all of which are helpful in identifying the type of region being studied. In 1971, the R.M. of Lacadena had a population of 1,322, while the town of Kyle, the largest urban centre in the municipality, had a population of 509.[2] The 2016 census revealed that the population of the municipality had shrunk to 535, while the population of Kyle remained fairly consistent at 449.[3] This is a striking demonstration that within the rural areas of Saskatchewan the impact of urbanization has been substantial. In 1971 the population of Kyle represented 39% of the population within the R.M. of Lacadena. In 2016 that percentage had more than doubled to 84%. While these regions have always been rural, they are now very clearly, "sparsely populated." Often the people in these regions are isolated, and the purchase of simple products like milk or bread require a 50 km journey (one way) to the nearest grocery store.[4] The only church building in the community of Lacadena was associated with the United Church of Canada. It was closed in June 2011 and sold on January 31, 2017.[5] This was one of the last remaining vestiges of what was once a thriving, busy village in west-central Saskatchewan. The office of the R.M. of Lacadena was moved to the town of Kyle, 35 km southeast of Lacadena. The Canada Post office has been closed and the nearest postal outlet is in Kyle. There is a community hall, formerly a school, located within the village site that was purchased and renovated to serve the community. A few abandoned houses and businesses, crumbling sidewalks, and over grown yard sites remain to remind the occasional visitor of what was once a bustling village.

For the purpose of my study, I use the term "sparsely populated" rather than rural, since rural has significantly differing definitions across our own country and certainly around the world.

> For a region to be considered 'rural,' according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, its *population density must top out at 150 people per square kilometre*. Using that measure and the results of the 2016 census, there are 150 rural ridings in Canada. The remaining 188 – 56 per cent of the total – are considered urban.[6]

In order to be beneficial beyond the region studied, a more appropriate and concise descriptor of the environment will be used. Kent Hunter, in *The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church*, states, "There are many studies and stories about the rural church, but very few of them define what they mean by rural."[7] He describes the challenge of trying to define "rural" when there is such a wide variety of types of rural communities and therefore, rural churches. In his Doctor of Ministry project entitled, *How can the Rural Church Pastors*

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[2] Statistics Canada, Population: Geographic Distributions," accessed December 27, 2018, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/statcan/CS92-805-1976.pdf.

[3] Statistics Canada, Population.

[4] Fred Smith, interview by author, Kyle, SK, April 26th, 2018. [Pseudonym]

[5] Madelyn DeGruchy, interview by author, telephone, February 27, 2019. [Pseudonym]

[6] Eric Grenier, "Why the Liberals can't afford to ignore rural Canada," last modified January 15, 2019, accessed January 17, 2019. **www.cbc.ca/news/politics/grenier-liberals-rural-1.4977618**. (Emphasis added)

[7] Kent Hunter, *The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1993), 14.

Network (RCPN) best serve to resource denominational leaders in equipping their rural pastors? Tim Beadle writes, "This tool unpacked seven distinct types of rural church communities throughout Alberta. These were identified as remote, country, resource base, smaller sibling, resort, corridor and industry based."[8] Sparsely populated areas are defined by the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a geographical area with seven people or less per square mile for the entire service area."[9] But even this definition must be refined if it is to be helpful for this particular study, and relate to similar areas around the world. Within the boundaries of the Canadian Midwest District lies Nunavut Territory. If one takes the incredible expanse of land (nearly 1.9 million square kilometres) and the extremely small population (37,996), the resulting population density equals .02 people per square kilometre.[10] However, in Nunavut the population is centralized in communities that are spread across the vast area. These communities are certainly isolated, but individuals within the communities have neighbours nearby creating a critical mass of population that allows for services to be delivered within the community. In sparsely populated regions, like the R.M. of Lacadena, isolation is exacerbated by the distances between farms and families. There are no centers where the population is drawn together, such as there are in the territory of Nunavut. While there are significant challenges in providing services to the people of Nunavut, those challenges are different than those in sparsely populated areas. Therefore, I refer to the project's study area as "a sparsely populated region," distinct from both rural regions and isolated communities, which are unique in their own right.

More and more of the west-central Saskatchewan prairie region is becoming sparsely populated. More and more of the world is becoming sparsely populated, even while the world's population continues to rise. The opportunity I had to study the impact of declining population in the R.M. of Lacadena on spiritual care provided information that guides my ongoing work with churches across this part of the Canadian prairies. It provided some specific ideas about how spiritual care might be delivered and highlighted the importance of working together as the church of Jesus Christ with the best interests of the inhabitants in mind.

Theological Foundation

Background

The Church was not conceived of, nor designed, by humanity. Rather it is the instrument designed and built by God. In Mt 16:18, Jesus clearly states, "I will build my

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[8] Tim Beadle, Project for partial fulfillment of Doctor of Ministry, Lutheran Theological Seminary, *How can the Rural Church Pastors Network (RCPN) best serve to resource Denominational Leaders in Equipping their Rural Pastors?* (Saskatoon: n.p., 2015), 70. "This tool" refers to the educational aspect of Dr. Beadle's Rural Church Pastor's Network material used for denominational leadership to familiarize them with rural church demographics. See Beadle, *How Can the Rural Church Pastors Network*, 69

[9] Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Sparsely Populated Areas," accessed December 27, 2018, https://definedterm.com/sparsely_populated_areas.

[10] Wikipedia, "Nunavut," last modified November 2018, accessed December 27, 2018, https://www.google.ca/search?source=hp&ei=BBshXJfcN6O6jwTT8LSoBw&q=what+is+the+land+area+of+nunavut+territory&oq=What+is+the+land+area+of+Nunavut&gs_l=psy-ab.1.0.33i22i29i30.3929.11380..13830...0.0..1.379.6091.1j22j6j5......0....1..gws-wiz.....0..0j0i131j0i10j0i22i30.i5LL8oLLdQ0.

church…"[11] The task Jesus left for his followers is commonly known by the descriptor, "The Great Commission." In these oft quoted verses found in Mt 28:18-20, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This raises the question, "What did Jesus command?" In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is confronted by a scribe who asks, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answers, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mk 12:28-31). Dr. T.V. Thomas first identified this instruction, which includes the Great Commission, to me in 1984 in a first-year evangelism class at Canadian Bible College. Dr. Thomas called this instruction The Three GCs: The Greatest Commandment, the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. The Three GCs are linked together by Mt 28:20, "…all that I have commanded you.…"

The Commission Jesus leaves us with is clear – make disciples who will fulfill the Great Commission by obeying the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commandment. Referring to the church as an institutional concept, Mike Breen suggests "If you make disciples you will always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples."[12] The Church is the gathering of the people of God to participate in programs, but making disciples is usually not the primary practical result of church programs.

Nature of the Church

If it is our responsibility to make disciples, then it becomes clear that while it is the responsibility of Jesus to establish and build His Church, buildings are not the church.[13] We misconstrue and miscommunicate the intention of God when we refer to the church gathered for worship as the sum total of church. Theologically we understand that the church is the people of God. The word "church" is used 100 times in the New Testament to refer to God's people gathered either in a local setting or in the context of the universal church. Paul uses the word "body" eleven times to refer to the gathered people of God. William Barclay suggests that Paul highly values the use of the analogy of the body as the church, and he finds significant comparison between the physical human body and the spiritual body, the church.[14] When we couple this concept of the church of Jesus Christ functioning as a united body with the concept that God has created all of humanity with the need for community, we understand that a local church is a group of individuals united together following Christ (Jn 17:23). Yet the body of Christ is not called to be separated from the world around it. The church is called to be connected to the larger community of which it is also a part (Mt 5:14-16).

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[11] All Bible quotations taken from the ESV electronic Bible by Crossway version 3.3.3.

[12] Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Pawleys Island: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2011), 11.

[13] This does invite a deeper discussion into the concept of how Jesus builds His church using those whom the church disciples. That discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this particular report and therefore, it is simply assumed to be part of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those that have responded to His call to relationship through the atoning work of Christ.

[14] William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 171.

This is instructive as we consider what the church might look like in sparsely populated regions. It need not have a static centre for worship; it need not have full time, nor even part time paid clergy. Rather, it will be a mutually supportive, serving, worshipping community, in the process of being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ, while at the same time following the example and teaching of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29, 12:2). The people gathered together to form the church will utilize their resources, both physical and spiritual, for the benefit of the rest of the body. They will also use their resources as a demonstration to the larger community of the love of God for all of humanity.

What are some of the basic characteristics of the church that ought to be present as God's people gather and take seriously the goal of making disciples? The fundamental characteristic, as seen in Jesus' answer to the scribe in Mk 12, is love. Love first expressed toward God and then toward humanity.

After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as recorded in the book of Acts, we are given a glimpse of the outworking of that love for God and one another. Acts 2 reveals not only some of the characteristics of disciples, but the process used to build the church.

> So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:41-47).

The earliest description we have of this newly established church depicts a diverse group of people coming together from a similar heritage, and from geographically widespread areas that may have affected their current cultural realities. This, then, is the essence of spiritual care as lived out in the early church and is an example for us today. These followers of Jesus Christ were deeply impacted as they received the message of Christ; they took it to heart. As a result, they began to love God through common worship and to love one another by sharing. They cared for one another in practical ways, and they engaged in what we would describe as spiritual exercises: prayer, hearing the word of God taught, and corporate praise. Some of these spiritual exercises would have happened in the Temple Courts, as noted in Acts 2:46, but many would have occurred in private homes. It is this noteworthy all-inclusive caring for one another that is at the heart of spiritual care.

Relationship is another key aspect of the church. In Gen 1:26-27, it says, "Then God said, 'Let us make [humankind] in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So, God created [humankind] in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Embedded in this emphasis on being created in the image of God is the three persons of the Trinity that have been, and will be, in eternal relationship with one another.

God makes another clear statement about the importance of relationship in Gen 2:18-24 where it says, "It is not good for the man to be alone." John H. Sailhammer asserts that this declaration flows out of the instruction given in the previous two verses. The truth and depth of the declaration is more easily recognized in the Hebrew than in the English translations. The warning God delivers to humanity in verses 16-17 suggests that only God has the capacity to provide clear awareness of what is truly good for humanity and what is truly evil, or not good for humanity.[15] It is out of God's perfect awareness of what is indeed good that the statement flows, "It is not good for the man to be alone."[16] Thus, the need for humanity to be engaged in community is declared "good," not based on some human whim, but by God who knows the needs of humanity, and created a partner to provide "support in a wide sense."[17]

This expectation for relationship is clearly communicated in Genesis and is a thread running throughout scripture. We are created for relationship with God, and for relationship with one another.

In Gen 3:8, it says that, "the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden." God came into the Garden with the prospect of developing or continuing this relationship with Adam and Eve. Relationship had been broken by their disobedience, but God came seeking to mend and continue that relationship.

In Phil 2:1-11, Paul uses the example of Jesus to call humanity into a like-minded relationship of humility in their relationships with one another. As Jesus humbled himself in relation to God, so we ought to humble ourselves in our relationships with others. In 1 Thes 2:3-8, Paul writes further about this need for humility in relationship with one another. Writing from a personal perspective, Paul refers to the integrity of the relationship he had established with the Thessalonians based on a foundation of grace as they interacted with one another. The communication of the Gospel and the call toward maturity came out of a desire to honour God. However, in verse eight, he indicates that personal intimacy and transparency in those relationships is critical in the disciple-making process when he says, "So we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (1 Thes 2:8).

The call to disciple-making is a call to equipping:

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13) But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:14-17)

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[15] John H. Sailhammer, "Genesis," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 2*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 45.

[16] Sailhammer, "Genesis," 46.

[17] Westermann in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 2*, 46.

Making disciples, equipping followers of Jesus Christ, and developing those disciples into leaders requires relationship. Effective equipping will produce faithful followers who are able to produce other faithful followers and the result will be individuals and communities filled with the same quality of love and compassion that characterized Christ. This need to multiply and equip faithful followers of Jesus is no less, or more, true in sparsely populated areas. Jesus commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations in Mt 28:19. Therefore, and by extension, this commission includes sparsely populated areas in west-central Saskatchewan, in northern Canada, and anywhere else people have settled in this vast world of ours.

Theological Perspective on Spiritual Care

Spiritual care is provided when the Church lives out the commission to which it has been called by Jesus. The essence of spiritual care can be discovered in several statements throughout the New Testament that may be referred to as "one another" statements. These are the instructions given by various biblical writers who call the followers of Jesus Christ to demonstrate the love of Christ for "one another" in the Christian community called the Church, and who also call those in the Church to care for "one another" in the community beyond the Church.

> The attitude of Jesus foundational to this practice is recorded in Jn 13:3-5, 12-14:
> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him … Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet (Jn 13:3-5, 12b-14).

In verses 3-5 we see that because Jesus recognizes where He has come from and understands where He is going, He is able to abandon himself in service. It is this kind of abandonment to service that must be exhibited to and by people in sparsely populated regions as they face, in their shrinking communities, a growing number of abandoned homes, businesses, and church buildings. In John 13, as Jesus gathers with His closest followers around the table for the Last Supper, He demonstrates, in a very practical way, that service to one another may not be glamorous, but is something we do because of our connection to, and confidence in God. We serve because our identity is secure in our relationship with God. Spiritual care then, is so much more than just another spiritual activity. As was revealed in Acts 2, the infant church met the physical needs of the community as it ate together, and it provided the necessities of life for those who came from a distance.

Jesus reinforces this understanding of our responsibility toward the church community in Jn 13:34-35 when he says, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And again, in Jn 15:12, 17, Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you…These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

Paul, Peter, James and the writer of Hebrews expand on what it looks like to love one another, and thereby provide spiritual care for one another. As noted earlier, spiritual care is a very broad term. Such breadth makes it difficult to describe the activities and practices that constitute the provision of spiritual care within a community, and to measure whether the intended results of spiritual care are being achieved. However, for the purposes of this project report, spiritual care is defined as loving activities generated out of relationship with God, expressed toward those around us, with the intention of demonstrating the love of Christ in practical ways and affirming our hope in the eternal. Therefore, many activities of the church that have traditionally been understood as "spiritual care" activities will not be used as metrics to determine whether churches in sparsely populated regions are accomplishing the goal of providing spiritual care in the church and community. An emphasis on "church activity" will be replaced by an emphasis on the demonstration of "one another" activities in the church and in the community. While teaching, corporate worship and prayer are certainly activities of the church, they are also the building blocks for making disciples who engage in Jesus' work of spiritual care.

Research and Methodology

The developmental puzzle was used to engage written materials such as the history of denominational development in the area and the rationale for protocols used to establish two, three and four point pastoral charges for ministers who served in these ever-expanding geographical areas in the 1960s through the 1990s. The mechanical puzzle was used to examine whether the current spiritual care experience is perceived as satisfactory from the viewpoint of the people in the study area with particular attention given to the perception of the spiritual care experience in the sparsely populated region of the R.M. of Lacadena in west-central Saskatchewan.

Significant Criteria

Integrity

This criteria requires that each tool utilized be able to determine, to the greatest degree possible, that there is and has been a commitment to being truthful in the ways data is collected and utilized. I sought to articulate an etic perspective as part of the end result.
I went into the project anticipating that it would be predominantly about developing tools for similar research in other sparsely populated regions. I came out of the research, interpretation of data, and writing of the project prepared to make some recommendations about potential methods to meet identified spiritual care needs and prepared to test some of those methods within the community. The information was gathered in such a way as to actually shape the findings and shape the project.

Transparency

It was critical that as I engaged the people of Lacadena in my research, they understood and trusted that I had no hidden agenda. Integral in this was that my motivation was not to tie the denomination I am employed by to the solution for their perceived need. I engaged in conversation with many individuals who live in sparsely populated regions, small towns, and who participate in small churches of varying denominations. I received their responses to research questions and encouraged their feedback on hypotheses gleaned from my research.

Respect

Similar in many ways to both integrity and transparency, there was a clear demonstration of respect for the community in which research was being conducted. The fact that the community and its particular culture has inherent value is something I held as a core value during the entire study project.

Research Tools

The following research tools were utilized: Project Design Tool, The Windshield Tour, One-to-One Meeting tool, Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping, The Common Meaning Questionnaire, Restorative Practices, and Ethnography through personal interviews.

Summary of Learning

Analysis and interpretation of collected data was undertaken through conversations with members of the project team. Each member of the team had ministry experience in a wide variety of settings. Three members of the team were actively serving as ministers of small congregations in rural communities. Through these conversations it became clear that in sparsely populated regions three key factors needed to be addressed in order to understand the data gathered from community members. These key factors also needed to be considered when positing potential means of providing spiritual care in sparsely populated regions. These key factors are psychological connections, awareness of community identity, and leadership style.

Psychological connections are important for any rural community or sparsely populated region. The community as a whole will identify with a neighbouring town, or city. While this connection may be based upon proximity, it may also be based upon historic connections, facilities or services available in the connected community, personal relation connections or a perception of quality of life in a given community. There is often intense civic rivalry that dates back several decades between communities, so that the closest community may be vilified because of past events or attitudes. It is important to explore, with the residents of a sparsely populated region, if there is a primary community with which they feel a psychological connection.

Awareness of identity has great importance when considering spiritual care for and with people in sparsely populated regions. In rural settings and sparsely populated regions it is often difficult to separate personal identity and community identity. While everyone would acknowledge that there is a difference between these two identities, they are very much interwoven. Awareness of identity is shaped by a variety of factors, including life experience, community history, educational background and spiritual engagement at home and away. The segment in Jn 13, referred to earlier, highlights the importance of a positive self-identity in being able to serve selflessly and with abandon.

Leadership style, the third key factor, relates specifically to church leadership. Previous experiences and perceptions, both positive and negative, will need to be taken into account as plans are made to evaluate spiritual care needs and then to move forward with plans to meet those needs. If the community, or a significant portion of people in the community, desire to explore further options to expand spiritual care in their community the style of leadership used in that process will matter. There is a pervasive sense in many communities that have lost their churches over the years that hierarchical denominational leadership did not listen to the people most affected by that loss. There is often an inherent

mistrust of those in leadership, especially when those in leadership come from large and distant urban centers. Most residents of sparsely populated regions do not feel heard by those making decisions. There is a sense that decisions are made based on what is good for those in large centers and this gives rise to a sense of mistrust.

If denominational leaders truly wish to provide spiritual care in sparsely populated regions, they will need to pay attention to this mistrust, listen carefully to those who live in these regions, and speak with integrity. Leadership decisions must demonstrate that the people are being heard and their voices matter. Listening must be given primary consideration in this process; decisions cannot be made apart from ongoing conversations with the people affected. Intentional listening practices that lead to collaborative decisions will need to be employed.

Conclusions

Leadership in the early church was challenged by Paul who demanded that leaders "equip the people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."[18] This is the challenge with which the church in the 21st century must engage! This is true of every variety of the church in the world today, but it is essential in sparsely populated regions. As the church in sparsely populated regions embraces who they are, rather than trying to look like or be like churches in other settings, they have the potential to lead the greater church into the fullness of what Jesus envisions when he says, "... I will build my church...."

The focus of any attempt to strengthen the development of spiritual care in sparsely populated regions must not be to, "fix what is wrong," but to draw out what God is doing in, through and among God's people scattered throughout these regions.[19] Local groups of believers will need to be drawn together and invited to engage in conversation regarding what it means to be a community of believers in that specific region, and what resources God has provided for them to use as God's people. Conversations will also be required in order to determine logistical requirements and how to meet those requirements. It will be important, though not necessarily vital, that an outside voice be present to help facilitate these conversations, to help in assess what some of the logistical requirements might be for the specific region, and to help the local group engage with outside partners and access resources beyond their own sparsely populated regions.

How do we begin? What is proposed in this project will require a monumental shift in thinking. We must set aside the distinctions that identify denominations and focus instead on the similarities. We must offer Gospel-based perspectives and partnerships.

If local gatherings of believers are to survive and potentially thrive in sparsely populated regions, these partnerships must be more fully explored and engaged in than ever before. Denominational leaders, assemblies, conventions and representatives must set aside long held biases and sectarian attitudes. These partnerships will form the foundation of sustainable health in the spiritual care of sparsely populated regions.

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[18] Eph 4:12, 13, NIV.

[19] Cameron Harder, *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together*, Herndon: Alban Institute, 2013), 16-17.

These partnerships must also facilitate leadership development within local congregations. The goal is to fulfill Paul's instruction in Eph 4:12, 13. Clergy that are "apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers," in Paul's vocabulary, are to work their way out of a job and move on to the next community. Local followers of Christ must be equipped to do the work of spiritual care, spiritual training and leadership development.

This project has strengthened my resolve to help local churches, denominational partners and ministry partners engage in conversations that strengthen their capacity for spiritual care that makes disciples in the local setting and beyond, to the ends of the earth.

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