

### A Nice Little Church in the Country

Editorial

By Chris O'Reilly

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“A nice little church in the country.”

You might drive past a couple  
on the way to somewhere else;

you might have attended one as a child;

you might have started your ministry  
in one or two or more;

you might be in one or two or more now, as  
the minister, the organist, the Sunday School  
teacher, elder or WMS secretary, the one  
who dusts the pews or brings gladiolas and  
sweet peas from your garden for worship.

Or you might have no experience  
(nor desire any!), with the “nice little  
church in the country.”

Wherever you see yourself, this issue of *Women's Perspectives* explores the life and legacy of those “nice little churches in the country”. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has many of these churches; indeed, the foundation of our denomination rests on Jesus Christ our Lord, and on the many yellow brick, white clapboard, hewn log, “insulbrick” rural churches that stand as silent witnesses on sideroads, backroads, crossroads and no roads in the untamed north, the majestic prairie, the rugged foothills, the picturesque harbours and peaceful villages across Canada.

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Some of these churches have closed – closed as communities change, people pass away, and rural life is eclipsed by urbanization, but many remain – some struggling, some thriving. All have given immeasurably to this denomination: faithful souls who have worshipped the Triune God week after week, sharing their celebrations and sorrows. Children have been taught the scriptures, young couples married, old lives laid to rest. The Word of God has been proclaimed, the waters of baptism have marked belonging to the family of faith, the bread and cup has been shared as the Holy Spirit helped us taste and see the goodness of the Lord. How many rural WMS groups have prayed and given and knitted caps or packaged bales for “the mission field”? How many rural children have first heard of Jesus’ love at the community Vacation Bible School? How many young musicians honed their skills playing for worship as their church family beamed with pride?

Rural congregations have given immeasurably to the ministers in our denomination: continuing the education begun at a city seminary, often “breaking in” the rookie pastor who came armed with bookcases of new ideas and only stayed a couple of years before moving on and “moving up” to the bigger church, the more prestigious pulpit, and the larger stipend.

We owe a great debt to the “nice little churches in the country”. And perhaps they still have things to give us as a denomination – a reminder of the importance and primacy of worship; of a community where we are known by name, and even by need, and loved; that the person



matters more than perfection of performance; and that God still chooses to bless and use the small things, the small places, the “nice little churches in the country”!

I grew up in the city, but always had a desire to live in the country. I’m very thankful – and very blessed – to have served God in rural places in 25 years of ministry. I’ve experienced so much through the congregations I’ve ministered with, and wider involvement in the PCC and internationally. I’ve milked cows, cradled lambs, driven tractors, taken supper out to the field, celebrated rural life and farming in worship, and been enriched by faithful souls from New Zealand to New Brunswick who long for meaningful worship and ways to serve Christ. I’ve celebrated the life of men and women who tilled the land behind horses; I’ve prayed at public school graduations; been invited to share the greatest joys and deepest sorrows of peoples’ lives even when they’re not members of ‘my’ churches.



What an honour to see three and four generations worship in a congregation; to baptize the children of those I've had in youth group, joined at their graduations, officiated at their weddings. I'm thankful to be part of communities who care, who welcome me and my family with open arms and open hearts, and are part of the place I call home. While the places I've been and seen are different, the common things remain: the presence and power of the Lord, the love and legacy of God's people, and the challenges and opportunities of mission and ministry.

The challenges are many: less than 3% of Canada's population are involved with agriculture; policies are formed and decisions are made that increasingly benefit urban and suburban life. Denominational policies and decisions sometimes follow suit. Too often rural churches are seen as problems, as rungs on the ladder to ecclesiastical success, the place you start your ministry but never stay.

The congregations I serve face tough challenges. We have families who move to a small place because housing is more affordable, but the social services they need are less available. We are learning how to minister effectively to them and welcome them into the church family. One of my congregations sits less than a kilometre from what will be the largest landfill in Canada – pastureland that is now a garbage dump. One congregation is growing; the other faces emptier pews each year. Serving two very different congregations and communities is a challenge in and of itself! These “nice little churches in the country” are like so many others: we are seeking to follow Christ in the two important things He gave us to be and to do: to love the Lord and to love each other.

I hope this issue of *Women's Perspectives* evokes memories and enriches growth; offers snapshots of rural people, rural communities and rural congregations. There's a broad perspective here – from women in different denominations, different places and in different roles, but all with a passion for God and for God's people in those “nice little churches in the country”.

*Chris serves with the congregations of Knox, Thedford and St. Andrew's, Watford, and is beginning her 22nd year of ministry there. Chris loves her family (the amazingly patient husband Jesse and the amazingly surprising daughter Clare, and amazing miracle brother Terry in Switzerland – plus the dogs!) and their home amongst the Carolinian forest near Lake Huron. Having just wrapped up softball and ball hockey season, Chris is looking forward to stepping onto the ice for another season of ice hockey with the Crosscheckers. Chris is currently reading Eric Metaxes' wonderful new biography of one of her faith heroes, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the writings of Shauna Niequist in 'Cold Tangerines' and 'Bittersweet', and listening to the music of Andrew Peterson, Steven Curtis Chapman and Sara Groves. Chris is looking forward to the kitchen renovations being done, and having more time with her guitar. Chris' passion for rural ministry is rooted in her love of God, the outdoors, and the wonderful people who've enriched her life and ministry in rural congregations and communities across Canada and around the world.*

# Three Churches Past, Present and Future

By Catherine Minielly



I was born into a farming family in Warwick Township in 1951. Our neighbourhood was close knit, as most people farmed a hundred acres with a pasture farm nearby. Most of us had grandparents and extended family in the community, who, along with our parents, were strong role models in our early years. Most of us attended the Presbyterian Church located down the road from our farm.

Knox Warwick was a little rectangular yellow brick building with no Sunday School room, hydro or water. We were the third point in a three point charge, sharing a minister with Knox, Thedford and St. Andrew's, Watford. Being the third in line, our Sunday service was in the afternoon, preceded by Sunday School, with all classes being held in the four corners of the building. The afternoon time was not always popular with teenagers, who had other plans for the day, but we were dairy farmers, so chores and milking meant that the afternoon service was a convenient time for us.

My parents were strict observers of Sunday so that meant no cards or ball games. Often we were glad to get to church to see our friends and have a social time. It was the expectation that you would be in church each week. An empty pew meant that there must be an illness in the family or that an emergency in the barn kept you away.

Neighbours would call as soon as they arrived home from church to check on your well being. Most people married, bought a farm in the immediate area and took up their place in the pews at Knox.

When thinking of the Knox days, two things really stand out to me: music and Sunday School with our beloved teacher, Jean Runnalls. To be one of "Jean's girls" was pretty special. Memorization of the Shorter Catechism and Bible verses, followed by the lesson from David C. Cook materials were the order of the day. The take home papers, particularly the Sunday Pix, were carefully saved to be read during the sermon time as there was no place for a nursery for young children to be taken during the service. It was sometimes an endurance test for both child and parent, especially during long communion services.

Music was an important part of our time together at Knox. I started playing piano for the Sunday School at an early age, where we opened and closed with two verses of a hymn. I learned "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Bids Us Shine" first. People must have tired of singing them every week until my skills advanced but there were no complaints, only support for my fledgling efforts. It was an early education in learning to play for congregational singing that still stands me in good stead today. I'm sure

# Three Churches Past, Present and Future cont.

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folks were relieved when I added “Tell Me the Stories of Jesus”, “Dare to be a Daniel” and “When Mothers of Salem” to my repertoire. Church hymns were picked by the organist with the minister supplying the number for the last hymn on his arrival just before church started. It was sometimes fun to see the organist pass the minister a note after the sermon giving him a different number for the last hymn as she thought it went better with his sermon. We had a large choir at Knox, with all parts covered. We enjoyed old gospel tunes and what we thought of as the “new hymns”: “How Great Thou Art” and “The Old Rugged Cross”. Choir practice was often on Sunday night but this interfered with the Ed Sullivan Show and Bonanza, so was moved to Sunday after church. We had a lot of fun, learned a lot of music and praised God with enthusiasm.

Friends and family sharing a common set of value: integrity, a strong work ethic and the responsibility to help out a neighbor, set an example of how to live life and provided a strong blueprint for children as they grew to adulthood and took up their life’s work. There was a strong sense of belonging at Knox -- you knew who you were and that your name stood for something.

I completed high school and went off to Teacher’s College in London and began teaching in another area of Lambton County. It was during the seventies that things began to change. Many of us went off to school and did not return to the farm to live our adult lives. Dwindling attendance and major repairs needed to the building lead the congregation to the difficult decision to close Knox and amalgamate with St. Andrew’s, Watford. Both congregations embraced the opportunity and a new church family emerged with the same caring attitude and energy for doing God’s work in our community.

It was about this time that I returned to the area, now a young wife and mother, and we attended St. Andrew’s with my parents. Once again we were surrounded by extended family and our side of the church was a very busy place with many lively little boys making their presence felt. Thankfully, St. Andrew’s had a Sunday School room and Sunday School was held during part of the church service. Hallowe’en parties, car rallies, Christmas concerts and music were a big part of our life at St. Andrew’s as well as Sunday worship services. Children were given a prayer pal -- an adult from outside their family, to mentor and role model the Christian life for them. Interestingly enough, our

son’s prayer pal was Wayne Runnalls, the son of my beloved teacher Jean, who had played such an important part in my life. So it was with Wayne and our son as well. I think that the children growing up at St. Andrew’s had that same sense of belonging and place that had served us so well. Again, strong, shared values and hard work ethic gave them a good start in a world that is changing at a dizzying pace.

Those changes affect not just the world in general, but our world in particular, and certainly the world of rural communities and churches. All of those lively little boys have grown up, gone off to school and almost all have remained in the city to take up their careers. My parents and many other stalwarts have passed away. St. Andrew’s attendance has tailed off and once again it is apparent that at some point hard decisions will have to be made regarding its future.

Recently, Knox Thedford was in need of a church musician. I went to play as a stop gap measure until a full time pianist could be found. That hasn’t happened and somehow, Knox Thedford has become home for us. I have now attended all three churches in our charge, a somewhat unusual occurrence I believe. Knox is a busy, energetic place where people whose churches have closed have found a welcoming church family. I believe the youngsters growing up there now have that same sense of belonging and caring that we experienced so many years ago in Warwick.

We are blessed in Thedford with a growing congregation that is full of energy and vision. They are active participants in the community and the local public school. There are tremendous gifts and talents within the church family and we are blessed to have been led by a dedicated, committed pastor for the past twenty one years. The challenges of the rural area are certainly with us as we face declining enrollment at the school, the amalgamation of our municipality and changes in the agricultural sector. I am thankful each day to be part of such a welcoming church family and rejoice in the opportunities to praise God with them each week.

*Catherine Minielly is a retired teacher, an avid gardener, and serves on the Worship Planning Team for the Knox Thedford-St. Andrew’s Watford Pastoral Charge.*

By Tim Keller



Young pastors or seminarians often ask me for advice on what kind of early ministry experience to seek in order to best grow in skill and wisdom as a pastor. They often are surprised when I tell them to consider being a ‘country parson’ — namely, the solo pastor of a small church, many or most of which are in non-urban settings. Let me quickly emphasize the word ‘consider.’ I would never insist that everyone must follow this path. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking about. It was great for me.

Many young leaders believe that the ideal first ministry position is a position on the staff of a large church with an older, mature pastor to mentor them. The limits of this model are several. You can’t teach a younger pastor much about things they aren’t actually doing. And in a large church they aren’t a) bearing the burden of being the main leader, b) leading a board of elders, c) fund-raising and bearing the final responsibility of having enough money to do ministry, and, d) doing the gamut of counseling, shepherding, teaching, preaching.

In a smaller church as a solo pastor you, and only you, visit the elderly, do all the weddings and funerals, sit by the bedside of every dying parishioner, do all the marriage counseling, suspend and excommunicate, work with musicians, craft and lead worship, speak at every men’s retreat, women’s retreat, and youth retreat, write all the Bible studies and often Sunday School curriculum, train all the small group leaders, speak at the nursing home, work with your diaconate as they try to help families out of poverty, evangelize and welcome new visitors to the church, train volunteers to do some (but not all) of all of the above tasks, and deal with the once-a-month relational or financial crisis in the church. No amount of mentoring can teach you what you learn from doing all those things.

Some will be surprised to hear me say this, since they know my emphasis on ministry in the city. Yes, I believe firmly that the evangelical church has neglected the city. It still is difficult to get Christians and Christian leaders to make the sacrifices necessary to live their lives out in

cities. However, the disdain many people have for urban areas is no worse than the condescending attitudes many have toward small towns and small churches.

Young pastors should not turn up their noses at such places, where they may learn the full spectrum of ministry tasks and skills as they will not in a large church. Nor should they go to small communities looking at them merely as stepping stones in a career. Why not? Your early ministry experience will only prepare you for ‘bigger things,’ if you don’t aspire for anything bigger than investment in the lives of the people around you. Wherever you serve, put your roots down, become a member of the community and do your ministry with all your heart and might. If God opens the door to go somewhere else, fine and good. But don’t go to such places looking at them only as training grounds for ‘real ministry.’

My own pathway of personal development began with nine years of being the pastor of a small church in a small town. This equipped me well for church planting in New York City, because, when you start a church, you must be a generalist, not the specialist that large churches create. I repeat — I am not proposing that everyone follow the same course. Being a ‘country parson’ is not the right move for everyone. But for some it is.

*Tim Keller is a well known author and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in downtown Manhattan. While his polity and theology may not match ours, his wisdom can teach us. His blog post below sums up well the gifts of being a rural minister! So, from one man’s perspective.....*

Posted By Tim Keller on December 2, 2009 @ 7:06 AM

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# Twenty Years in Geraldton

## A Retrospective

By Rev. Joanne MacOdrum

Twenty years of ministry in one location would give anyone a great deal of material for reflection. Why would one stay for 20 years, I have frequently been asked, and why in Geraldton of all places?

I believe very passionately in vocation – that a true ministry comes, not by the will of the individuals involved, but through the will of God. So I believe that God put me in Geraldton, three hours away, in good weather, from the next nearest Presbyterian church, and God put me there for God’s own reasons. Some of those reasons were about my growth as a Christian and as a minister, some were about the congregation in Geraldton, and some of those reasons I will probably never know.

Ministry in an isolated location forces you to really examine what and why you believe, and commit to it fully. Geraldton is most assuredly not a Christian community, and the isolation has as much to do with that as it does the physical location. I had to have at hand all the time the words of faith that people needed to hear. Twenty years in one location makes you take seriously your commitment to rejoice when the people of God rejoice, and to weep when the people of God weep. You can’t be fully and intimately engaged with the people until you are a part of their lives, and that takes time. I believe that I am called to long-term ministry in God’s church.

It takes years to become part of a community; years to build trust in a community. My ministry changed significantly with the years at St. Andrew’s, Geraldton: the more life events you have participated in, the more you are a trusted partner in the life of the community. With this increase in trust comes inclusion in the community that goes far beyond the church doors: when you have led a young person through youth group, officiated at their marriage and the baptisms of their children, when you sit with their father as he dies and know them well enough to

mourn with them, you enter into the community in a unique way. It takes many years of time invested to truly weep when they are weeping, for them to see that your heart truly is with theirs. I firmly believe that it is only when you have reached this point, that the congregation will open their hearts enough to truly hear the good news that you have been commissioned to bring.

I am now in a rural charge in southwestern Ontario. It is a very different world, and a very different way of doing ministry. Northern Ontario was above all a transient population. By the time I left St. Andrew’s less than 15% of the congregation had been present when I was originally called. At St. James’, Forest, many in the congregation have roots in this part of the world and this congregation that go back as many as six generations. Dealing with that transience

meant that you could not assume that what you taught even six months ago was part of the existing corporate memory. You had to start “from scratch” every year; no project could be long term. It reminded me very much that even those who came last will receive the same great reward from the Master. What I learned all by myself in the north has stood me good stead for whatever challenges God may send my way.

**“It takes many years of time invested to truly weep when they are weeping, for them to see that your heart truly is with theirs.”**

*Rev. Joanne MacOdrum is currently the minister at St. James Presbyterian Church, Forest in Ontario.*

# “Down Under”, not “Down and Out: Rural Ministry in New Zealand

By by Rev. Robyn McPhail



NORTHLAND, NEW ZEALAND -- Twenty-two years of rural ministry and I'm not looking for a change.

The rural church was what I grew up with: church in the community and church as the community. The faith of my farming parents was a whole-of-life faith and such practical Christianity is a common thread through my years of ministry. It is relevant to the farming communities in the South of New Zealand where I began and to the Far North where people have moved in for the lifestyle and mix uneasily with the older community including First Nations (Maori) people.

I define 'rural' in terms of getting livelihood directly or indirectly from the land and living in neighbourhood relations (cf. urban choice). In this context faith is never a private and individual matter, for it is how we live with the variables of seasons and markets, and how we keep the 'soil' of our relationships healthy.

My ministry has involved resourcing people for this life. We have this amazing treasure – the Bible – full of stories and teaching about life on the land. I think this has been the biggest blessing for me of rural ministry, week by week to read scripture in relation to the local community and find it grappling with the very issues we face. There are the personal matters of love and forgiveness, set in the midst of the very social, economic, environmental, and political issues that challenge us most: water and soil

health, urban power centres and the rural fringe, parochialism, the industrialisation of agriculture, loss of future hope.

I like rural churches also because they are never big and wealthy and therefore cannot avoid the reality that the church is the people. Back in 1996 the neighbouring parish on the Canterbury Plains was facing life without a resident minister. Would they close up and church goers make the journey to the big town nearby? They weren't viable, it was said, so what were their options? We worked together to establish the first Presbyterian parish in New Zealand led by a ministry team. The local people knew they had a community to serve and, if they closed their doors, there would be a gap in the community. They still send me their parish newsletter and I can assure you they are alive and well.

What's clear to me is that the measure of being viable is not found in our financial statements, but in having a mission in our community.

*The Rev Dr Robyn McPhail, Northland, New Zealand, is a Presbyterian minister currently working with a parish formed by the local union nearly 40 years ago of the Methodist and Presbyterian parishes and Secretary of Churches Together, the regional body, which combines Methodist Synod and Presbytery.*



By Rev. Joyce Sasse

## Joyce prefaces this prayer:

“Taking on a student intern is a challenging task. In rural communities, newcomers face the added difficulty of being considered an outsider. Rural congregations often resist changes initiated by ‘outsiders’. I was asked to supervise a student intern.”

I would add that this prayer might resonate with all of us -- ordained, lay, young, old, new to rural ministry or those who have been around the fields a time or two!

Lord, there are responsibilities involved when we accept a student intern and agree to help train him or her. For when we agree to do this, we put ourselves on the line, and all that we hold dear concerning our Church, our ministry, and our people. And we become more vulnerable!

Let me tell you what I mean. Rural ministry has become my life, and I take great pride in having been called to serve you in this capacity. Each day I struggle with my parishioners to serve as an Ambassador of Christ. Each day I struggle, too, to combine my natural instincts and professional skills with what we believe to be your will for us.

But will a fresh recruit from college understand all this? Will he or she taunt us because our understanding of “professional” is so very different from what others consider “the norm”?

Teachers have curriculums for their norm. But a pastor’s “curriculum” is largely determined by the time and place in which we find ourselves.

Doctors do battle with the demons of cancer and heart disease in well-equipped clinics and operating rooms. But a rural pastor is called to battle “The Demons of the Spirit” across kitchen tables and in chilly church basements.

Lawyers are free to limit their case loads and can request more time when preparing cases. But people get sick and die, young people need counselling, youth leaders need assistance, and for the clergy, there’s always the relentless return of the Sabbath.

TV producers presume access to a host of people and resources to help them prepare even one hour of documentary. While pastors, in the few hours per week we can grab for study and preparation, must write and direct the script, and lead the congregation, as we witness to the ongoing “Word of God” made apparent in our midst.

Sport coaches, to build a winning team, must be as professional as the athletes with whom they work. Most of our colleagues in ministry are our beloved lay people, who have never heard the word “homiletics” and don’t want a laid on “conflict management” program...Even fellow clergy from the city are a profession apart, with their offices and their single place for worship. But together, we are The Church!

I’m not putting down the informal, spontaneous folksy way we function. I’m not making a plea for us to be other than we are, for we are as we choose to be. But having said this, we need your help, and your patience.

How do we insist on rigid professional standards for the intern working in our midst?

How do we help the intern translate the many skills and insights he or she has by making suggestions that aren’t intimidating?

How do we help our student touch the Kingdom of God buried deep within each parishioner?

How do we challenge our interns to the very limits of their abilities, and still keep them fresh and dynamic and innovative and humble?

This is an awesome task, Lord. But if it be your will, we look forward to this opportunity to serve you as best we can. Amen.

*Rev. Joyce Sasse is a retired United Church of Canada minister with a wealth of rural ministry experience, serving in the prairies, and working with congregations and rural communities throughout Canada and internationally. Joyce is an excellent writer, thinks deeply and passionately about faith, ministry, and caring for God’s people.*

Women's Perspectives (WP) strives to keep women in touch with each other and share their theological perspectives, biblical insights, special interests, joys and concerns with the whole church. WP is published 6 times yearly. It is written by guest editors and overseen by WP Committee, in co-operation with the Women in Ministry Committee.

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