

Session 2 – Effective Small Place Ministry

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[0 : 00] I want to think in this session about how we can be most effective in small place ministry. I'll just start by circling back to that theme I was talking about in the first session.

that is just this desire. I do not assume everybody in the room has ever metesives and desires, struggle with being in a small place. I think some of us maybe are from a small place and we just love it.

That's what we know and we are very happy where we are in our small town or rural areas. Some of us, and I would include myself here, came from a small place and then had a desire to get out of the small place and get as far away from it as I could. And I tell some of my own story in that book I think you received as you came in.

So I won't repeat it all here, but a big part of my story is coming back to a small town, having desire to get... I had in my own mind a sense of significance being connected to distance from my hometown I lived and size of community in which I ministered. And then also, you know, probably size of church, that kind of thing.

And a lot of my God working on me and continuing to work on me over the last 17 years or so has been rooting out some of those ungodly impulses and replacing them.

[1 : 26] And this is not a one-off, obviously. It's an ongoing thing. Replacing them with better gospel instincts and a truer sense of what is significance and what is important. And does my ministry matter?

Does my ministry in a small town and a small church matter? Sometimes I felt those questions more acutely than others. I wonder if you can identify with that particular Sunday where it seems like everyone is either sick or on vacation all at the same time and you were not aware of it. You did not anticipate it. I mean, I remember the Sunday that happened to me and, you know, you kind of get a sense as a pastor or maybe as a...

maybe as an elder shepherd or leadership of the church, when the strong attendance Sundays are going to be, maybe you're kind of keeping tabs on who's on vacation. Maybe you hear someone's sick or out of town or whatever.

This one caught me by surprise. It was just like tons of empty seats on that Sunday. And I remember it shaming. It provoked fear and questioning. And I just felt like, oh, this is not healthy. I should not be responding this way. There's something off in my heart. And that led me to read a book by Don Carson about his dad called the...

[2 : 56] I think it's the Memoir of an Ordinary Pastor. Is that right? Yes. I just commend that to you all. As a great book, Don Carson writes a biography, essentially, of his dad, who was a small town pastor in Canada and lived a very ordinary life, but also an extraordinary life.

And, you know, these are moments, I think, that can be inflection points for us where we just feel that panic or that fear. Is this...I'm the kind of person, I can imagine 10 ways that my church will need to shut down.

I can imagine all the conflict that might arise or people leaving and going elsewhere. That's just the way I'm naturally bent. And God used that particular Sunday to call me to something better, to take me to a story of a pastor in the faith hall.

There have been other times, too. I mentioned earlier in the first session, you know, visiting a pastor who's ministering in an influential college town.

Or sometimes I'll be walking by the big city church, and it's in Boston, where I live an hour and a half from. Those churches can be 200 years old. And they're impressive monuments, and they're faithful.

[4 : 16] And some of them are still faithful to the gospel. And they just feel weighty and significant. And again, this wrestling with is what I'm doing significant arises.

I don't assume, as I said, I don't assume that all of us have had those same sort of struggles, but I do think many of us had. And this is sort of, to me, it's sort of like the old tree falling in the forest question.

If a pastor preaches a sermon to 25 people, does anybody hear it? If you're a layperson and you prepare thoroughly, need an excellent Bible study for the few who come out onto the church basement classroom on a cold, dark night in the middle of January, does it matter? Does it count for anything?

If you leave a congregation of 50 people or 20 people for 20 years or 30 years or four years, and it's a lifetime invested.

Nobody knows about you or your church. Does anybody care? Does it matter? Does it make a difference? So why would you go to, why would you remain for a long time in a small place? Why not maximize your potential and your influence by going elsewhere to a bigger place?

[5 : 29] And I just want to remind us and encourage us briefly here on our way to thinking about productive ministry in small places.

I just want to come back to why we would minister where we minister. And I'm going to collapse some of the things I expand in the book. I don't assume that everyone's read it.

The questions I've been asking over the last, especially a decade or so are questions like this. What does it look like to see my town and my church and my ministry the way God? Seems them. What does it mean to value them as God values them?

What if the gospel that God has called me to proclaim in Pepperell is not meant to be just the content of my preaching, but it's meant to shape the contours of my ministry?

In other words, not just what I say, but what I do and how I do it. This is Galatians 2.14 where Paul challenges Peter for not walking in step with or in the direction of the gospel.

[6 : 32] So there is, this is from Tim Keller, there's a directionality to the gospel. There's a shape to the gospel. The very logic of the gospel takes us in certain directions.

It shapes our lives. And I would say the lives of our churches in certain ways. And might it be that God has called me and called you with the gospel, not just to have it be a message we proclaim, but a message that shapes the community.

That's so that we are embodying, not just expressing verbally, but embodying in the shape and nature of our church in our small town, the very nature of the gospel.

What if my ministry in a small place has the potential to uniquely reflect and embody certain aspects of the character of God and the truth and beauty of the gospel in ways that an urban or suburban ministry never could, and vice versa, I would hasten to add.

You know, what if urban, suburban churches can do things that my small town church can't, but what if my small town church can do some things that those churches are not able to?

[7 : 43] Those are some of the questions I've been asking. And what I've come to see is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the best place to begin thinking about the places where we minister.

It's generative. The gospel of Jesus is a message that involves individual souls, but it's bigger than that. It shapes all communities of Christ followers.

So just real briefly here, a few values that the gospel imparts to us and then sends us with to our churches, our communities.

The gospel, small, slow, and unstrategic. The gospel is the news of a kingdom that comes really small. It's the gospel of the kingdom. The kingdom comes like a mustard seed, Jesus says.

It's the news. The gospel is the announcement, the news of one man, a God-man, who dies one death and accomplishes one resurrection that leads to the salvation of the world.

[8 : 41] So the gospel comes really small. It announces a kingdom that comes really small. Maybe, therefore, small is not as bad as our culture often thinks it is.

Maybe it's not necessarily inferior to big. It might be in certain cases, but maybe not necessarily. Maybe my small ministry in Pepperell and your ministry where you are can uniquely embody and express precious aspects of the gospel of the mustard seed size kingdom that other communities could.

Maybe small is better than we think. Again, the gospel sometimes works very slowly. It changes me. It changes my congregation over time rather than overnight.

The image I've thought of is sometimes like the gospel works like a sprinkler system, not a fire hose. And I bet you can all think of ways that the gospel has just been gently pushing into your life and changing you over long periods of time.

We love the dramatic testimonies. And that's important. And those are good where God just delivers someone overnight. Those happen. Praise God. But there are also lots of areas of my life where I can see progress, but man, that progress is slow.

[9 : 58] And the gospel works that way. Maybe my relatively slow ministry in Pepperell can uniquely embody and display some precious aspects of the slow, patient gospel of a slow, patient God.

Maybe slow is wiser than we think. The gospel is the announcement that the all wise, all beautiful, all sovereign God is willing to send his own son for a sinner like me, for normal people, for those who are not very influential.

The gospel is the declaration of God's lavish, unstrategic love. It's ridiculous that God would expend what he expended to get me to win me.

That's inordinate. So maybe my unstrategic ministry in a little town that's not a high tech mecca. It's not a high culture mecca.

It's not full of movers and shakers. Sometimes I said, you know, we have movers and shakers in Pepperell, but they don't move and shake like the movers and shakers in Boston. They're not as influential.

[11 : 09] They're not as cutting edge. Maybe that's not such a bad thing. Maybe that can uniquely embody and display some precious aspects of the lavish gospel of a prodigal God.

Maybe strategic isn't always what we think. So what I'm saying is the very logic and nature of the gospel sends some of us to minister in small places.

This has been really helpful for me to think this way. That we have not wound up in our places by accident or because we couldn't find something better.

And it just so happened. The gospel shapes us and sends us and takes us to the small places. So, yes, the gospel is the message we take, but we are the ones taken, sent by the gospel to the places we go.

Maybe we stay there for a period of time. Maybe we stay there for a long time. Maybe we stay there for a lifetime. I just have a deep conviction. I really do think it's been formed by the gospel that the ministry we are doing as lay people and as pastors in small towns and rural areas matters a lot to God.

[12 : 23] It's really important. God cares about it. So when you preach a biblical Christ-exalting sermon to 60 people or 16 people, or if you're not the one preaching, if you sit there amongst those few people and you apply it and you consider it and you live it out and you share it with other people, that matters to God.

He really cares about that. And when you see one person come to saving faith and that person is just a normal person living in a normal place, that's really important. And when you invest in the leaders of your town, in the mayor or the librarian or the fire chief or the police officers, people who are not known outside your town, but maybe they're important in your town.

That matters to God. And when you invest in the people who are unimportant, even in your town, the person who works in the transfer station or the local townies who, you know, the retired guys who congregate in the coffee shops and cafes and you invest in them, that matters to God.

He really cares about those relationships and those gospel conversations. The reason it's important is because the world will not be reached without thousands of Christian workers willing to pour out their lives in all those small forgotten places.

The trickle-down effect won't trickle fast enough. You know, if you want to reach Pepperell, you cannot, and you want to reach Pepperell today, you can't go to Boston and trust that the cultural influence will somehow convert people to Pepperell.

[13 : 53] 20 years later, there will be people who have died in these 20 years who won't be there to be influenced. So the best way to reach Pepperell is to go to Pepperell. The best way to reach Athens is to go to Athens.

It's not to go to wherever, the nearest big city, and hope that there'll be cultural influence seeping down into those people. Jesus loves and invests deeply in small, unimpressive towns.

We saw that in Nazareth. We love small, time-present churches. This is a picture, when we live this out, it is a picture of the very gospel we embrace.

And that's a theological vision for small-place ministry. That's taking our cues, our instincts, from the gospel itself. Not just a message to communicate, but a message that's transforming our lives.

And so our ministries, our churches, are taking on the shape of the gospel. I was talking two days ago to a friend we used to be a doing-mode pastor. We were FaceTiming.

[15:00] He's at a small church in California now. And a couple days ago, he was meeting. He said he is connecting into his very post-Christian town, connecting with lots of people.

I said, how are you doing? He said, my soul is just overflowing right now. Because he's reading the Bible with a couple of very non-Christian guys. He said, there's one guy he's reading with who has got tattoos on all his knuckles.

And he has no Christian background. He doesn't understand the first thing about the Bible. And he said to my friend Ben, after they had just been reading the Bible since just a couple days ago. He said, why could we really do this?

He's not a Christian. He doesn't know the Bible. But does that matter to God? Yeah. You bet that matters to God. That matters deeply to God, what Ben is doing.

Over the past 17 years in my ministry at Pepperill, I've walked alongside a woman in my community. Her name is Judy. And I got to know Judy and her husband soon after we moved to town because we lived one, two.

[16:02] We lived two doors down from them. And she asked me after her husband died to officiate at his funeral because we were friends by that point. She wasn't closely connected.

She had been kind of marginally going to a church and wasn't closely connected with that church. So she asked me to officiate. I got to know her in the process of doing the funeral. I got to know her daughter and her granddaughters.

And therefore, when her son-in-law died a few years later, her daughter asked me to do that funeral. So now I'm like really getting connected into the family. I mean, Judy began eventually attending our church.

She'd heard and understood the gospel for the first time. And I baptized her when she was 80 years old. And the neighbor's called. It's just an incredible opportunity.

And she became part of a small group that met in our living room. Years later now, she's still alive. She's walking with Jesus. She's in a relationship with other people at our church. And this is the grace of God.

[17:00] This woman, Judy, is not hugely influential. I've not invested in her because I know that, you know, 20 years from now, she's not going to be alive 20 years from now. She's not going to be influencing influencers somewhere.

But is this a good thing to invest in Judy? Yeah. This is infinitely important and incredibly precious to God. So there's another great story I just was hearing about recently.

We planted a church. Our church planted a church. So we're a small town church and we're planting small town churches. That's our vision. It's to plant other churches and neighboring communities.

And we don't know how long it will take, but we're just going to slowly work away at it. And we're gathering other churches now. We've got this group called the Village Green Collective at New England. 10 or 11 churches, all small town New England churches, planting small town New England churches together.

And so our first church planted was in the next town over. So, I mean, the next town over is Townsend, Massachusetts. It's 10 minutes away from our town. And a lot of people have said, why are you doing that?

[18:05] That's too close. And our answer has been, well, there are people driving out of that community to come to our community. And we'll talk about this in a second. But we want them to stay in their community.

We think they can reach people that we've not been able to reach. And you know what? The church plant is two years old and they are reaching people who we have never reached. And for me, 16 years of ministry.

One of those people is a guy named Merrill. And he just died a few weeks ago at age 85. He had been involved in a local church for years.

He'd been in leadership. And then I don't know the ins and outs of it, but he got really badly hurt. And as sometimes happened, he just pulled back from church altogether. Stopped coming anywhere.

But there's a guy in our church named Tom. He's one of the leaders of our church. And he invested. He would go once a month to, Merrill was getting older by that point, to Merrill and his wife, Rita's.

[19:08] And he would do, with another guy in our church, he would work on the lawn. He would trim hedges. He'd do stuff that needed to be done. Inside, like month after month after month.

For year after year after year. He had this relationship with Merrill. Tom went on the church plant. So he's in Townsend, Massachusetts. That's where Merrill lives. And Tom said to Merrill two years ago, would you come to this church plant?

And for some reason, Merrill, we had invited to our church many times. He said, yeah, he came. He came at the very beginning of the church plant. And he invested and was there every Sunday for two years before he died.

That's age 83 to 85. That is amazing. Like at the end of his life, after decades away from church, I think God's preparing him for the new creation, for heaven, and for a deeper fellowship with other believers.

In his last couple years of life, he came back in the church community. Does that matter to God? Yeah. That matters. It's not because Merrill's going to go and fluid his effort out there, but because Merrill is an eternal soul.

[20:17] So the gospel comes small like a mustard seed. It often works slowly in our lives. Gospel love is often unstrategic, lavish, inordinate. And we see from that that God does not despise small, slow, unstrategic things.

In fact, they're the heart of the way he works in the world through his gospel. And that knowledge frees us up to be okay with small, slow, unstrategic ministries, if that's the kind of ministry to which God calls us.

But there are two really significant points, two disclaimers I need to make here. First, according to Jesus, the kingdom comes small like a mustard seed.

But then what happens to it? It grows really big until all the birds in the air can nest in its branches. And yes, the gospel sometimes works slowly, but other times it works really, really fast.

Think of mass conversions. Think of people movements to Christ. And when the gospel captures the hearts of the leaders and influencers, sometimes does, it can be massively productive.

[21:22] So the point I'm making from the nature of the gospel is not that small, slow, and unstrategic are necessarily better than fast and strategic and influential.

That's not the point. I'm just making the point that they're not necessarily worse, as our culture often assumes they are. In other words, I'm not trying to say that small town ministry is better than city or suburban ministry.

No way. You know, I'm really glad that Martin Lloyd-Jones didn't stay in his little town. I'm glad he went to London. I'm glad that Tim Keller didn't stay in his little town in Virginia.

I'm glad he went to New York City. But I'm just seeking to make room for small town ministry as equally important, as really good, as a valuable way to spend your life for Jesus.

So that's the first disclaimer. Second, I'm really eager that what I'm saying about small, slow, and unstrategic being okay not be interpreted as an endorsement or approval of mediocrity or a lack of faith or a lack of passion or a lack of effort.

[22:31] This is, I think it's a potential nature of what I'm saying. So, you know, people in small towns, including small town pastors sometimes, can get okay with mediocrity. You can be proud of it.

And we can get comfortable with the status quo. I know of a small town pastor, a new for a number of years, who was, I could just tell he was on the glide path into retirement.

And he was just easing in to retire. He was starting to recycle sermons. He was phoning it in sometimes. He was doing a mediocre job. He wasn't reaching the community he was placed in.

I just recently, last few weeks, heard of another small town pastor who had been preaching AI-generated sermons. He found on the internet. Now, there are multiple issues there, obviously.

But mediocre ministry is not what I'm advocating for. The gospel does not, obviously, does not endorse that at all. So here's how I try to think about this for myself. I think there's a paradox here that we should embrace.

[23 : 30] When it comes to numerical growth in our churches, we should want it more and need it less. Really good. We should want it more and need it less.

I like this way of expressing it better than, you know, like the faithful, fruitful thing, which we often hear. I think this could get us some truth that's uniquely helpful and important.

We should want it more because we want more people to know Jesus. And our experience of God's love causes us to want to share it with other people. We want them to embrace it as quickly as possible.

We don't want them to be slow about it. So it's good and it's right to pray and work for rapid gospel growth in small places. We should ask him for revival. But we don't need God to do that because our joy is not found in ministry success, but in God, in the gospel.

We should pursue gospel growth with all our hearts. There's no rule that because we're in a small town, we must have a small church. I know there are sizable, growing, vibrant churches in small places.

[24 : 32] And God can do that. He can bring revival. I've got a friend who planted a church in North Carolina a number of years ago. It's grown a lot since then. A lot of conversion growth. Various churches planted from that church in the neighboring towns.

And that can happen in small towns. God can do that. I have a hero, a dead hero, William Grimshaw, who was an English minister. He was friends with John Wesley, friends with George Whitefield.

He pastored a tiny little backward town called Haworth, population 2,000 in the northern England, 1700s. Four years after he got to his town, so it's a population of 2,000.

His tiny little church had grown to 1,200 people in the summer months, and he had to expand in church building. And if God can do that in Haworth, he could do that in our towns.

It's not beyond town. Is there any place too small for God? I don't think so. I think he sees them all. I think he cares about them all. And, you know, that example, I think, just encourages small church, small place ministers to long and pray and work for a big movement of God more than we already do.

[25 : 43] We should be more prayerful. We should be more active. We should be more trusting. But simultaneously, the gospel encourages us to need God's extraordinary work less.

And to be content if God chooses to give us something small. So, you know, the famous John Newton, author of Amazing Grace, he was a friend of this guy, William Grimshaw.

And Newton wrote this about William Grimshaw. He said, That's just a depiction of gospel freedom. Is that? You know, like, I don't need this. I really long for this work, but I don't need it. I'm happy preaching to a few on a farm. That's okay with me.

So God may choose to display the beauty of his character, the wonder of his gospel through our small and slow strategic ministry. Or he might choose to display his gospel and his character by causing our work to become bigger, faster, and more and more influential.

[27 : 07] That's not what I was. That's totally up to him. He's the good and sovereign God. We're called to pursue conversions with all our hearts and the long for more of them.

We're called to one growth or in simultaneously the less. Now, I want to suggest a particular gift for small town pastors, members, church members, as we think and talk about pursuing God's glory in our towns.

I'm going to borrow here from a Princeton sociologist called Robert Othno. He wrote a helpful book called Small Town America that was published in 2013. And Othno says the most significant factor about small towns is that they're small.

So there you go, Princeton sociologist. That's very helpful. Actually, the more you think about it, the more helpful that insight becomes. He says residents share many of the same physical views every day.

You know, like if you live in a city, your friend lives in the same city, but it's a big city. You're looking at different, you have a different visual horizon. And not so in a small town.

[28 : 19] You are actually in the same place. And you're seeing the same things every day. So buildings, stores, restaurants, lakes, rivers. It means also that the residents know many of the same things.

And they're affected by the same thing. So if there's scuttlebutt around Taino. There's controversy in our town several years ago. You know, should they dump some kind of waste in our town?

And people had street signs. Everybody cared about the same thing in our town. I read an essay by E.B. White, you know, Charlotte's Web guy, a number of years ago, called Here is New York. It was a reflection on New York City. And he said, New York City is so big that it can swallow up whole ocean liners at conventions. And nobody knows about them anymore. You know what he means by that?

Like, you know, if there's a convention of 2,000 people in Pepperell, everybody knows about it. If there's a convention of 2,000 people in New York City, nobody knows about it except those 2,000 people.

[29 : 17] So we all know and care about the same things in our small towns. And, you know, interestingly, we're connected even through memory often in our towns.

So this is kind of cool. There's a Dunkin' Donuts in Pepperell. There's a Dunkin' Donuts of every small New England town. You have to have at least one. There's two in Townsend the next town over.

But the one in Pepperell moved a number of years ago from one location on Main Street. They built a whole new one. And I've been at Pepperell some 17 years, so I know where the old one was.

That was probably eight or nine years ago. And I can say to other people in Pepperell who've been there equally long, oh, yeah, that's where the old Dunkin' Donuts was. And that connects us.

So we're connected in space and time. Do you resonate with this? Like if you've been in your place for a while, you see what other people see. You remember what other people remember.

[30 : 17] And that is a tremendous gift for us. You illustrate. It connects us deeply. Wathno, in his book, Small Town America, he introduces this, I think, really helpful metaphor.

And I've thought a lot about it in the years since reading this. And this is his way of understanding the way you live in community in a small town, particularly versus a suburb.

So he says, you know, residents of small towns, they sometimes drive out of town for errands. Maybe you go on a trip or you need to run to a bigger store or something. But they tend, residents of small towns, especially isolated rural small towns, tend to experience their community as a bounded space.

That's his term for it. He says the municipal limits are like a circle. So a resident of a small town lives within a circle. And more isolated, if you're a small town out in Iowa somewhere and you're two hours from the nearest decent-sized city, you do almost everything within the circle.

If you're living in a suburb, the image what they'll use is an arrow. Because if you map your life, it's not everything within the bounded space.

[31 : 33] It's you go this direction to go to work. You go this direction to drop your kids off at school. You go this direction to go shopping. In fact, one of the things you're looking for in a suburb is ease of access to other places.

So it's the circle and the arrow. Now, here's the key, I think. That the scale of a small place permits and encourages frequent overlap within the circle of a small place.

Because it's smaller. Because we're together with other residents. And because we're living within the circle. There is overlap between the people who are living within the circle.

This is one of my favorite things about living in Pepperell. I expect you've noticed it. Where you live. We have one grocery store. We've got one post office. One elementary school.

One middle school. One library. And our town is not all that big geographically in terms of population. So we see the same people regularly in varying contexts.

[32 : 37] In varying places around town. We get to know the people and their families. So our two older kids were in elementary school a number of years ago now. They're in my school.

But when they were in elementary school, two of their teachers had a walking route that went right past our house. And they would run out to them in the driveway and greet their teachers in the middle of their walk.

The son of our son's former Boy Scout dead leader was in our son's middle school class. You don't need to understand all those connections. To know just here like there's a well of relationship. The guy who used to work at our transfer station is good friends with a landlord in town who rents to a couple in our church.

And there's so many overlapping relationships in Pepperell because it's a circle and because it's small. And so the point I want to make is that fruitful small place industry recognizes that as a massive advantage.

This is not something to bust out of. It's something to live within and to appreciate and embrace. It's gospel centered, community engaged Christians and churches want to live within the circle of their local communities as much as possible.

[33 : 48] Now, that I don't know how that strikes you, you know, what I just said. But not everybody agrees with that. In fact, a lot of church growth experts disagree with that. So I came across a quote a few years ago in a book I was reading.

I want to read it to you. And this is from a well-known ministry leader who says, we need Walmart churches. Churches that will serve regional rural markets.

Churches that are friendly, carry lots of programs, are customer driven rather than institution driven. Churches that transcend the deep traditions of small communities and give permission to worship without alienating family histories and relationships.

And I have to say that is pretty close to the opposite of my understanding of the value benefit of small town rural ministry. I don't think we ought to transcend or tear up the circle of our small communities by being regionally oriented.

Instead, I think we ought to happily live and serve and minister within the circle of our small town.

And I want to suggest four ways for your church to live within the circle of your town.

[35 : 02] These four ways I didn't make much of Jesus and they promote the gospel. And I'm going to run through quickly. They're in the book too. So, you know, if you want to go back and read that at a later point, you can. Number one, be a listening church.

Being a local church means being a listening church. We need to study the people around us, understand what makes them tick, know how they speak, think, what they value, what they're proud of, what they like to eat, how they like to relax.

Peperol has a rich history. It goes all the way back to the Revolutionary War. There were Minutemen from Peperol who fought in the Revolutionary War.

In fact, we're very proud of this guy, William Prescott, who was, I think he was a colonel in the militia. And according to some people, he's the guy who said, don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.

I think probably multiple people that's treated to, but we're going to claim them for that. We're proud of them. And you can drive by his house, the Prescott House. And I do it right there.

[36 : 06] That's a big deal for our town. We recently had a celebration. This year, Peperol is celebrating its 250th anniversary. And we've got a giant birthday cake on the rotary in the center of town celebrating 250 years.

That's a big deal. There are all these events, celebrations. And if you want to know Peperol, I mean, you've got to know something about the history of Peperol. You should participate in Peperol.

So be a listening church. Knowing someone else, I mean, this is just obvious. It's an act of love.

You cannot love what you don't know. So you've got to just start by listening.

I know a guy called Ron Claussen. He's a rural ministry leader. He led the Rural Missionary Association for many years. And he talks about this transformation that happened in his ministry. He was in a very rural place. He started to list some people, live among them. He learned to hunt because that's what the guys in this church is. He learned to hunt.

[37 : 10] He rode along with ranchers and their tractors. He went along to cattle sales. There was this one time where he was trying to wrestle a calf. And he says he fell on his face in the mud.

And they were like, he'd see his grandchild watching and laughing at him. But he noticed that as he listened to them, they started to listen to him on Sunday mornings and discipleship and just one-to-one connections.

So how can you do that? How can you listen? I mean, a lot of it is. I'd love to hear from you how you listen when we get to work. Take some of the Q&A; and thoughts in here.

But a lot is just like be present in the community of asking questions. It's not just delivering announcements to people, but asking questions and living alongside them for a long time.

You can do things as a church, too. I think you can make this part of the culture easier. So our church has started these. We've done, I think, three or four now evenings of panel discussions with not four church members, but inviting guests from our community, addressing various issues in our town and region.

[38 : 21] So how can we serve the elderly? What are the needs of the elderly in our region?

There's a drug epidemic in New England. So we did an evening about that, about substance abuse

and foster care and adoption.

We did one of those recently. And we invite experts and people who are on the front lines, not Christians, who are helping with these things. We bless them and give them gifts to say thank you. We listen to them. We ask questions. That's what it means to be a listening church. And that can help to grow a culture of we don't just want to rush in. But we want to begin by listening and hearing what's actually happening.

Second, be a servant church. So, yeah, the gospel confronts the dark realities of small town life. There's racism in small places. There's a lot of hopelessness and despair.

Also, there's a lot of stuff to affirm. Small towns often rally together. There's civic spirit. There's a sense of mutual responsibility. We can affirm that. That's part of theological vision, seeing where the gospel corrects and where the gospel endorses.

[39 : 30] And we have lots of examples of this in our town's house where there'll be a catastrophe. I know years ago there was a fire. A father and his son were out of their house because the house was destroyed.

And the community was rallying together, pitched together. Our church was part of it. It would have been weird for us not to be. Because everyone was contributing. So, you serve alongside of the people.

Sometimes, you look around and you see where your community is doing a great job of service. And then rather than doing your own thing as a church, you just come alongside when they're doing. Our church does not have a food pantry because we've got a good one in town.

So, we've said, how can we support the good food pantry in town? And our church is one of the most generous donors to that food pantry. I've joined the board of that food pantry.

So, we're not trying to do our own thing. We're trying to serve by connecting to the good things that are already happening. Sometimes, the service happens when the church is gathered. Sometimes, it happens when you're scattered and people are living missionally.

[40 : 33] One of our gathered opportunities to serve is this thing we've done probably for over a decade now called Service Sunday. So, there's always a town parade. Lots of stuff is thrown in the town parade.

Candy and wrappers. It's a mess along the parade route. There's fireworks. And so, that's a mess on that field. And there are lots of people in our community who are older and we need a lot of help around their yards.

And so, this Sunday after the town parade, the Fourth of July parade, we have one early worship service. And then, everybody puts on a church t-shirt and we flood out into the community.

And we do service projects. And we clean up the parade route. And we clean up the town field. And our church has a reputation in our small town for doing that. People will say, oh, you're the church that does that.

People will drive by and hum their horns. They recognize us because of how we've done it for a decade. Be a celebrating church. I think celebrations are one of the most important identity shapers for small towns.

[41 : 38] So, I mentioned our Fourth of July parade. It's a massive deal in Pepperell. People set out their lawn chairs hours in advance along the parade route to reserve their spot. And people go nuts.

You know, like the Girl Scouts are marching and the Boy Scouts. And they've got all these refurbished red tractors in town. They're going up in the parade route. And the Daughters of the American Revolution.

That's probably a New England thing. Mel Babies are down here, too. You know, like just so much civic pride. And people love it. So, we were thinking years ago, like how can we be part of our town? How can we be engaged with our community? And we thought, yeah, we want to serve the town. But wouldn't it be weird if you tried to be someone's friend and you only ever served them? Wouldn't that be weird if you wouldn't?

If you insisted on serving them dinner but never eating a meal with them? It just wouldn't feel like a friendship. So, friends, yeah, they serve each other. But they also just hang out together.

[42 : 39] So, we thought, well, if we want to be friends with our town, let's value what our town is. As long as it's not involved with it. We want to celebrate what our town celebrates.

So, we have a float in the town parade. And the purpose of the float is not to hand out tracks. It's to be part of what our communities do.

And we walk in it. We see so many people we recognize along the parade route. And we're making connections like that person now knows that this person is part of the church.

They didn't know that before. They knew each other from the gym class or whatever. And that's been incredibly beautiful. At a recent 250th anniversary celebration in our town, I was asked by a guy in the community to dress up as a colonial pastor in colonial guard.

And deliver a message in the person of Joseph Emerson, who was a Presbyterian minister in Peppertal 200 plus years ago. And I did it for the sake of the gospel.

[43 : 45] I did it. So, there's photographic evidence of me in this little trickler hat, you know, and a pastor's garb and breeches and the whole nine yards. That's an incredible gospel opportunity to stand up there in front of a lot of our town and speak words that this genuinely converted man, a minister from 200 plus years ago, spoke.

So, figure out, we've got to bring them to you. Figure out ways to celebrate. I'm sure a million of you guys do that more effectively than I do. Be part of a local school. Take gifts to teachers who are overworked and stressed and frazzled and love them.

Or go to sports games because that's what your small town cares about. Be a celebrated church. Be a proclaiming church, finally. Not enough to be a local, listening, serving, celebrated church.

To be the church, we need to proclaim the gospel that creates us and shapes us. And we should seek to do this in ways that do not necessarily, don't unnecessarily offend or confuse those around us.

I think sometimes small town churches dig in and become so isolated and put up unnecessary barriers. We reject culture altogether.

[44 : 58] That's not helpful. We don't want to assimilate the culture, but we don't want to just reject culture wholesale. So, at the end of the day, though, we need to speak the gospel word.

We're not saved by our celebrating and listening. We're saved by the gospel. And the gospel must be spoken. It's got to be lived, but it must be spoken. And so, God will use us, or willing, as we've been promoting, creating, deepening friendships.

He will use those friendships as pathways for the gospel, the converting word, to run along and to convert people. So, let me just close. I'll just share one personal experience of small town life.

A few years ago, it was a Monday morning. I dropped our two older kids off at middle school. And then I parked my car, and I walked into the gymnasium behind the school.

That's where the local elections often happen. And I knew one of the women at the reception table for the election because we had served on the board of the food pantry together.

[46 : 01] And another one used to be the chairperson of the Friends of the Lawrence Library, which is right next door to the church. And so, that's been sometimes a little bit of a tricky relationship, navigating that.

Sometimes, you know, probably badly. And there's been a little tension here and there. But we've worked hard on that and sought to be good neighbors. And so, I knew her. I voted. And then I deposited my ballot with a guy who works for the local media company.

He's recorded events at our church. And I said hi to a former Selectman who I met when I was taking my traps to the transfer station probably 15 years ago. He was out canvassing for votes at the recyclables area.

And that's where I met him for the first time. And then I just developed a friendship with him. I served on a town committee with him. He's now coming to a party. He's a member of our church. He and his wife are members of our church.

I was with my youngest son, Henry. And I said to him, after all this meeting, I just said, it's really great to feel like we belong in our town. And Henry said, he was probably maybe nine years old, eight or nine years old at the time.

[47 : 10] He just said, I love Keppro. And there is so much value in being embedded in a place for a long period of time. I mean, I genuinely would say I bet many of you are much better at this than I am.

But when you've been at a place for 16 and a half years, even if you're not great at it, by virtue of time, unless you're totally sheltering yourself from the community, you've got to build relationships.

And God can use those relationships to transform the lives of people if we're faithful and communicating the gospel and loving them and investing in our church for the same. And I would love to hear more from you all about some of these things I just spoke about. Let me pray and we'll, if we have some time, we'll have M-S-I-T-I for Q&A; for discussing. Father, would you use our ministries, our churches, our lives for your namesake?

[48 : 12] Father, I think of Judy and Meryl. I think of this guy, my friend in California is reading the Bible one-to-one with who said, I just, I need this, my life.

I think of a guy, Nick, a former neighbor of ours, just said a couple of weeks ago in our small group, who just shared his testimony of how he never had ever seen the gospel, and he does now. He has assurance of salvation for when he was a wife, and he just praised you for these things. I know you're doing this all over, and we just need to be reminded of how important these things are, how precious they are to you.

So, encourage us to press in on the more deeply, and to see the value of what you've called us to. I pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Can I just say one thing as well, it's like totally fresh, but I was, I'm listening to this book on Libby right now.

[49 : 20] Not a guy I've ever read or listened to. Adam Grant, he's a social psychologist, and his book is Hidden Potential. And he was saying this thing that really struck me as very applicable for us as pastors and just as Christians.

He was talking about this, there's this educational practice in Finland, apparently, that has been very impactful. And it's called a looping.

It's where a teacher will stay with the students. They'll move up a grade with the students. And there have been tests in Finland and here in the States and Indiana and another state, I can't remember, where when millions of students with their teachers will loop, their educational aptitude went way out.

And in Finland, sometimes students, teachers will loop for six years with students. They'll stay, they'll just keep on teaching the next higher grade. And Adam Grant said this, this so struck me, because it made me think of Hebrews 3 and Hebrews 10, where we're to consider one another day after day.

He said, instead of just specializing in their subjects, teachers also get to specialize in their students. And it made me think of, is it Hebrews 10, where the author of Hebrews says, consider one another.

[50 : 48] He doesn't say consider how to spur one another on to loving good deeds. He says consider one another how to spur each other on to loving good deeds. And I just thought, oh, that's so interesting that that counsel, that biblical counsel, actually finds confirmation from a social psychologist.

Like there is so much transformative value when we, and this is what small town ministers do best. We stay, we focus on individuals.

And I'm just, I'm so encouraged by that. I'm sort of that in the temple stream.