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The Forgotten Ministry

IN THE LATE 1800s, the Northwoods of Minnesota developed into a vibrant logging industry that covered over 200 square miles and employed over 30,000 men who were a "rude, rough, roistering, brawling, and lusty generation."[1] It was a place where men were as savage as the land they sought to tame. As the population grew in the region surrounding Duluth and Bemidji, the call went forth to establish ministry efforts to reach the logging camps. But those who responded found the primitive conditions unbearable due to the lice and maltreatment by the lumberjacks. So, few ministers remained.

Jack Higgins didn't set out to be a pastor to lumberjacks. However, in 1895, after serving urban churches, he was asked by the Presbyterian congregation in Barnum, Minnesota, to serve their congregation. Like most young men, the idea of going to a remote rural community was not appealing. Years later, he would reflect, "I could not understand why I should go to Barnum. Had I been permitted, I should have chosen

a farming community rather than a logging village. There seemed no chance to advance; and I had an eye on big churches in those days."[2]

While in Barnum, a lumber baron invited Higgins to visit his lumber camps in the Kettle River area. After being introduced as a pastor, they promptly invited him to preach a message. He accepted and gave an invitation that changed the course of his life as his eyes were opened to the desperate needs of the men in the lumber camps.[3]

In 1899, Higgins moved to Bemidji to serve as a pastor. In that place, he received his second education. His teachers were not trained theologians. No, his teachers were "saloonmen, gamblers, grafters, and the rag-tag and bobtail of humanity"[4] who taught him to understand the rugged logger and speak their language. It was here that he began to develop a passion for the lumberjacks of the Northwoods. Throughout the week, Higgins trekked by snowshoes or skis into the woods to preach to the camps.

After one such week, the elders of the church expressed their frustration and gave Higgins an ultimatum: either discontinue his work with the loggers or be fired. For many, the decision would have been easy: stay in the city and let the loggers come to them. But Frank was cut from a different cloth, and his response was immediate: "I don't need any time, and I have made a decision. This pulpit is vacant right now! A thousand men could take this church. The boys in the woods have only me." Submitting his resignation, with no salary or housing, he began a ministry of traversing into the woods on skis, snowshoes, and dog sled. He often traveled in forty-below weather to proclaim the gospel to men who seemed to be the most unreachable. Eventually, his territory would extend 200 miles west from Duluth, south to Brainerd and north to the Rainy River, encompassing 250 logging camps.[5]

It is one thing to preach to loggers; it is quite another to gain a hearing. To do so, he would first need to prove to the loggers that he was as tough as them, a man among men. They judged a man, not by the clarity of his mind or the eloquence of his sermons, but by the power

of his arm and the toughness of his spirit. To survive and thrive in the Northwoods, a man had to be able to stand on his own two feet. He had to be willing to fight the elements, the demands of the job, the tediousness of working months on end, and, when necessary, other men.

Years later, reflecting upon his work, he would tell a reporter, "If I were getting ready for my work again, I would take lessons in boxing. The men that goes [*sic*] into the woods to preach to men has to be a man first and a preacher afterward."[6] The March 2, 1907, edition of *The Bemidji Daily Pioneer* describes the challenges of his ministry: "In nearly every camp there are men who seem to hate the sight of a missionary. They sometimes try to break up the meetings, but 'The Sky Pilot' relies upon the other element to assist him in all such cases."[7] The book *The Last of the Giants* describes one such occasion when "the other element" was needed. "At one camp, the narrator states, Frank was having a Sunday afternoon service, and a man was heckling him. After vainly trying to shut the fellow up by appealing to his better nature, Frank hauled off and struck the disturber a mighty blow"—certainly the recommended practice of seminaries and missions agencies. "The force of the punch lifted the heckler off his feet, turned him over in the air, and left him headfirst in a rain barrel! While his friends pulled him out, Frank calmly proceeded to finish his sermon."[8] As he proved his toughness, they accepted him as a peer and grew to respect him as their "Sky Pilot."[9]

If the brawn of Higgins's fist earned him the respect to be heard, the size of his heart earned the reception of his message. What defined his ministry more than his willingness to engage in a scrape was his willingness to be with them. In a time when the saloons would welcome the loggers with open arms, the churches saw them as dirty and corrupt. While others rejected them, Higgins saw a mission field where few were willing to go.[10] Yet he soon recognized that to reach them he needed to be more than present; he needed to become involved in their lives. This meant going to the camps and bars and other places they

lived.[11] It meant traversing the wilderness in blizzards to visit camps. It required carrying a passed-out drunk back to his home and helping to clean and sober him up. It entailed loving and befriending the saloon owners he sought to put out of business.[12] It was said of him, "His religion consisted more of service than of expounding theology; his hand was more eloquent than his voice, and his heart gave greater help than his mind."[13] Throughout his ministry, the loggers, gamblers, and even saloon owners would count Higgins as one of their friends.

By 1904, with his ministry expanding, Higgins recruited others to assist him. These men were cut from the same cloth as Higgins, men who stood among men. Unlike the others, however, Richard (Dick) Ferrell (1855–1956) did not remain in Minnesota, but migrated to the logging camps of Idaho, where he continued holding evangelistic meetings in logging camps and small towns. He was an ex-prizefighter and blacksmith who accepted Christ during a message by Rev. John Stone at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois. After his conversion, Henry P. Crowell, president of Quaker Oats Company, paid his tuition to attend Moody Bible Institute, where he served as a student pastor at First Presbyterian Church, one of the largest churches in Chicago.

One night, John Stone visited Ferrell and introduced him to Frank Higgins, who was looking for rough and tough men to go into logging camps. Several days later, Ferrell walked into the president's office and, to the president's surprise, submitted his resignation, affirming that his calling was not to come to Chicago and preach to "silk plug hats and jewel bedecked women."[14] Instead, he was called to preach to the lumberjacks in Wisconsin. Like Higgins, Ferrell spurned the prevalent attitude of pursuing an urban church and recognition to pursue the obscurity of rural ministry. Consequently, in 1914, the Presbyterian Church (USA) Board of Home Missions commissioned him to go to logging camps in Northern Idaho, Eastern Washington, and Western Montana. The assignment was simple: "Go into the lumber camps,

where there are no churches and no preachers, and do what you can to spread the Gospel and help the men."[15]

During the 1930s and '40s, Ferrell traveled throughout Washington and Idaho preaching in the camps and conducting services in the small logging and farming communities. His "congregations" included a roll call of logging empires of the day: Anaconda Copper, Clearwater Timber, Diamond Match, Lincoln Lumber, McGoldrick Lumber, Ohio Match, Weyerhaeuser, Winton Lumber and more. In an average year, he traveled 19,048 miles; delivered 217 sermons; visited 222 camps, hospitals, missions, Sunday schools, and day schools; called on 902 families and 83 sick persons; wrote 380 letters; and handed out 633 Gospels and tracts plus hundreds of pounds of secular books and magazines.[16]

By the 1940s, the nature of lumber work changed. Rough, transient camps gave way to permanent housing and loggers commuting from nearby towns. Consequently, along with preaching the gospel to the logging camps, Ferrell began to establish Sunday Schools in isolated schoolhouses and abandoned camps.[17] In 1933, he helped to organize a Sunday School in a small farming community in Tensed, Idaho. From 1933 until after his retirement, he would frequently visit the struggling congregation, helping them establish a vibrant church. While holding evangelistic services in the community, Wayne Daman, a part-time logger with McGoldrick Lumber and farmer from Tensed, responded to the invitation to accept Christ.

As Ferrell helped establish the church, they enlisted the assistance of Stonecroft Ministry and Village Missions. In response, Stonecroft sent two young women, Lola Theisen and Ruth Goodrick, to aid in the establishment of a Sunday School. Beginning in August 1952, they provided leadership and teaching for the struggling church.

Ms. Goodrick grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin. Later she attended St. Paul Bible Institute and served as the youth director for the Southside Alliance Church in Chicago under the leadership of A. W. Tozer. Although she grew up in the city, she too answered God's call to serve

the rural church. Likewise, Lola would marry a local logger named Olle Flolo, while Ruth would marry Wayne Daman. Both families would then become long-time pillars in the church.

On August 3, 1953, the building was completed and the church established. The congregation dedicated the new basement to Rev. Ferrell, calling it "Ferrell Hall" in honor of his contribution to the church. Today, after over 70 years of ministry, the church continues to serve the small community. The founders are no longer present, but the ministry continues under the leadership of their children.

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Certainly, this story shows the importance of rural ministry. But it does more than that, for the events describe my own story of redemption. Wayne Daman, the part-time logger and farmer who came to Christ in that rustic evangelistic service in an out-of-the-way corner of the panhandle of Idaho, was my father, and the missionary, Ruth Goodrick, sent by Stonecroft Ministries, was my mother. The church they helped to establish became the church that provided my own spiritual foundation. It was in this little church that I not only learned the stories and lessons of the Bible, but also saw firsthand the reality of Christ lived out in the lives of its people. It was there that God began to prepare me for rural ministry.

Is rural ministry insignificant because it does not touch the masses? I pray not, for my very spiritual destiny was influenced by two men's willingness to abandon the masses and instead serve the lost in the Northwoods of Minnesota and rural communities of northern Idaho. Their work may not be important to the writers of church history, but it continues to be desperately important to me. If not for the ministry of Frank Higgins and Dick Ferrell, you would not be reading this book.

But the story goes far deeper than my own personal history; it goes to the heart of the gospel and confronts our assumptions about

ministry. For some today, the measure of success is found in *how many* we serve rather than *whom* we serve. We assume that success can be determined by what occurs within the rolls. Consequently, churches growing the fastest and having the most in attendance receive recognition in church and denominational conferences. Yet we must ask, "Is this the biblical definition of success?" When we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we find a different perspective, where "success" is measured by faithfulness and obedience. And we can be faithful and obedient only when we truly see the real need and then act to meet that need.

Yet, just as in Higgins's and Ferrell's day, rural ministry has become neglected. In their day, the church forgot that the call of the gospel is "to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8), even if it means traveling into the back country of Minnesota and Idaho. Today, rural America has been neglected by a society enamored with cutting-edge urban lifestyles.

In 2015, US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack submitted his resignation. After nearly eight years of seeking to protect and promote the needs of rural people, his frustration of dealing with Washington reached a boiling point. In an age where policies are driven by votes and votes are obtained in urban areas, rural communities are no longer important. The *Washington Post* reported, "Vilsack was frustrated with a culture in Washington that too often ignored rural America's struggles and dismissed its virtues. 'I just sometimes think rural America is a forgotten place,' he often said."[18] So also Thomas Lyson and William Falk, after reflecting upon decades of dismantling of federal programs and policies to combat rural poverty, lament that Washington has neglected the poor of rural America.[19]

Tragically, what is true in Washington D.C. has become true in the church. In an age when the siren's call is for relevance and innovation, the rural church seems irrelevant and outdated. The rural church does not make headlines, and rural pastors are not asked to speak at conferences.

The common perception is that the rural church is bound by legalism and antiquated tradition.

Ask a Bible college or seminary student to pastor a rural church, and they will look at you like you were asking them to pastor a church on the moon, with no people, no potential for growth, surrounded by dust and empty lands. In one survey of students in a Bible college, only thirty-three percent did not consider the size of the community important for prospective ministry opportunities. Further, only twenty-one percent agreed that growth potential was not a critical factor when considering a ministry.[20] When the same question was asked of the Pastoral Ministries students, only seventeen percent agreed that the size of the community and the growth potential was not a factor, and only twenty-eight percent agreed that the size of the church was unimportant.[21] This raises serious concerns as to why so few are willing to serve small churches in rural areas.

Read a book on the history of the American church, and beyond the days of the pioneers, the rural church will be absent. For many, the rural church has nothing to offer in advancing the kingdom. They view rural ministry as the minor leagues, a place to hone their skills before moving on to the major leagues of a larger urban church. It's no wonder that when I decided to pursue a doctoral program in ministry, some within the church I had been pastoring felt that I was merely using the church to advance my career and that as soon as I graduated, I would be moving on. It had happened too often in the past, and so they had good reason to be distrustful.

With a few exceptions, Bible colleges and seminaries exist in large urban centers. Consequently, those who attend receive extensive exposure to the urban church. As they begin their education, their introduction to ministry often begins as first volunteers and then staff members of the larger urban congregations. As a result, when they complete their education, it's natural for them to gravitate toward a larger urban church. Conversely, the student has received very little exposure to the

small church, and especially the rural church. It's not that they oppose going to the rural church; it's that small and rural churches aren't on their radar of places they would go. Because of their exposure to the multi-staff church, they are comfortable seeking a position in the urban church but find the prospect of serving as a lone pastor in a rural or small church to be frightfully intimidating.

The lack of visibility of the rural church in the educational process is compounded by the reality that those recruited to serve as instructors often come from or are pastors of large urban churches. This again goes back to the previous misconception that the size of the church measures success. However, this is not necessarily a deliberate bias against the small and rural church, but a result of the lack of representation of the small church. One of the problems is that those who pastor rural churches often lack the educational requirements necessary to be a professor. But the real tragedy is not just that denominational leaders, Bible colleges, and seminaries ignore the rural church. It is that, when confronted with the needs, people respond with a yawn of indifference. Unfortunately, the rural community and the rural church are becoming the forgotten ministry.

What would have happened if Frank Higgins played it safe and stayed in Bemidji where he had financial security? What if Dick Ferrell followed the conventional wisdom and remained in the large church in Chicago? What if Ruth Goodrick remained in Tozer's church, where she would have gained recognition? What if Phillip had stayed in Jerusalem, where the action was, rather than go into the wilderness of Sinai? What if there is no longer anyone willing to go "to the boys in the woods" or "to the ends of the earth"?

That brings us to the heart of this book. The message outlined in the following pages is not a rejection of the need for urban, suburban, and ethnically focused ministry. Without question, these ministries continue to be desperately needed today. Rather, the purpose here is to bring the rural ministry back into focus. Overlooking the rural church

and the forgotten places of rural America neglects seventeen percent of our nation's population.[22] The ministry may not be glamorous. It will not bring recognition and invitations to speak at conferences. It may not be trendy and cutting edge. But the people of rural America are just as important to the heart of God as the people in metropolitan areas. For this reason alone, they should be important to the church as well.

Effective ministry in rural communities begins with understanding. We must understand—and truly see—the incredible needs and opportunities if we are going to reach these forgotten communities. This starts by pulling back the curtain of our preconceived ideas and taking a fresh look at rural communities and the contribution that they can make to the health of the broader church in America.