

The background of the cover is a photograph of a small, white, single-story church with a dark brown roof and a tall, pointed steeple. The church is situated in a rural landscape with green grass, trees, and a wooden fence in the foreground. The sky is a pale, textured blue. The title text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

transforming church  
in **RURAL**  
AMERICA

*breaking all the* **RURALS**

Shannon O'Dell

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To Dad—Thanks for listening to me when, as an 18 year old punk, I told you about God’s call on my life. I will never forget sitting in that McDonalds booth and you telling me, “Son, if you are called, then go be the next Billy Graham.”

To Brand New Church Staff—For being my arm lifters and vision casters.

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To Tim Dudley, Laura Welch, Todd Hillard, and the amazing New Leaf Team—Thank you for believing in the mission of reaching rural America in a relevant way.

# Foreword

Are you aware that sixty-percent of all the Protestant churches in the United States of America average sixty people or less on a weekend? Great numbers of men and woman are strategically positioned in the little towns and villages and hamlets at crossroads all across the country—deployed as if by divine and sovereign decree. They occupy these places of great potential.

I wonder what might happen if every local church, every congregation and every pastor in all of these rural communities, would light up, ignite and catch fire? What would happen if they would catch, not a man-made substitute, but the fire of God from the hand of God and the altar of God and the spirit of God? What might happen?

I believe many do not try because they have been convinced it can't be done. They have never seen it done. They have never heard of it happening. But then, from time to time, God lights someone up on fire and He invites someone of great faith to dance the line which is the sharp and cutting-edge between insanity and faith... to dance that line and walk by faith to do a new thing...to create and innovate.

And I have seen that in Shannon O'Dell. It is the witness of a faithful servant of God, like Shannon, that transforms so many of the rest of us. There is nothing new under the sun—but occasionally we need to see a man or woman of God who tries a new thing that is so far from what we have imagined that we look—and we gasp—and in that gasping moment we realize this is something only God can do.

That was my experience when I sat in a crowd listening to Shannon talk about the way he was distributing the message of the Gospel through rural America by using a Hummer and satellite dish. A collective gasp went through the room.

First, because we thought, “What in the world?” And then we thought, “Oh my, what would my people say?”

What a moment—to experience someone who manifests the reality of consequential living! We look and we see that this person stretched, and stepped, and tried a new thing, and lo and behold the old old story was wrapped up in a new new package.

The story didn’t change, but the method did—and it was creative and innovative, and inspired each of us to try something new. Your new thing isn’t necessarily putting a satellite dish on a Hummer. (Don’t suggest that to your board. You will be calling U-Haul!)

But friend, I’m telling you the idea that somebody might try something that’s innovative and creative—that inspires me! And I want to think outside the box, and I want to imagine what might happen. What if I took the lid off? What If I didn’t say, “I am trapped by what is and what has been?” What if I dreamed a God-sized dream? What if God gave me today the dream that I have been praying? What if God satisfied my prayers and answered my prayers? Are my prayers too small?

“Show us a way, O God, to reach our community,” doesn’t get prayed often enough. “Give me courage, give me faith, grant me wisdom for the facing of this hour in my community,” is often left out. We don’t pray those prayers because we’ve got other concerns—smaller, more pressing things. It’s time for a God-sized dream. And a God-sized vision.

And so, this foreword ends and the book begins with a prayer. I pray for Shannon, and in so doing pray for rural America. And I ask you to agree with me in this prayer for Shannon and for the pastors of rural churches across this country—many who think what they’re doing doesn’t matter; many whose loftiest goal has been diminished to hoping that the gate keepers at the church don’t yell at them anymore.

*Oh Father God, we pray for Shannon O'Dell, for his family, for his marriage, for his ministry, and for his congregation. We pray for his witness and we pray for his mind, that he will think new thoughts and dream new dreams. We pray for his body that it will be healthy and strong, that he can run long the race that you have set before him.*

*We pray for his friends, that they will be true to him and true to You; that they will always lift him up, always encourage him, always help him on the journey. We pray for resources to flow into his ministry because it is Your work and what You have purposed to be done. We believe that You will resource what You have commanded to be done. And so we pray that people with money will give money, that people with time will give time, that people with faith will exercise their faith, that people with big ideas and big dreams and big visions will give those ideas and dreams and visions to the cause.*

*I pray, Father, that Shannon will encourage and challenge pastors and leaders in rural churches all across this country. I pray that the God-sized work you are doing in Arkansas through Shannon's ministry will be repeated in towns and villages in every corner of our nation. In Jesus name we pray for this. Amen.*

Mark Beeson  
Senior Pastor, Granger Community Church  
[www.markbeeson.com](http://www.markbeeson.com)



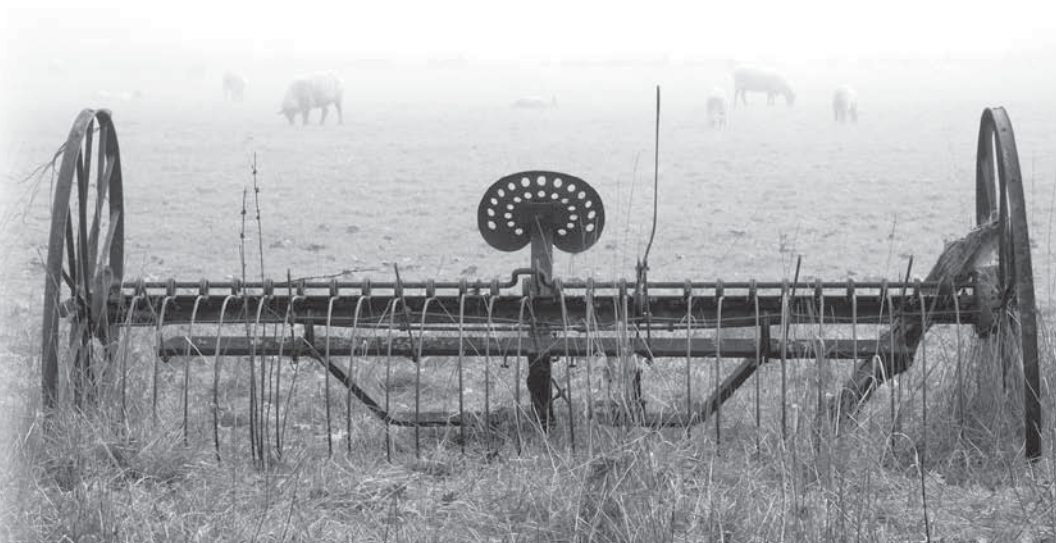
transforming church  
in **RURAL**  
AMERICA

*breaking all the RURALS*

**Part 1**

**BEGINNINGS**

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).





# 1

## POSSIBILITIES



### Rural Realities and God Possibilities

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor. 1:20).

The “Unwritten” Rural Rules:

- ☞ Successful churches grow in thriving urban or sprawling suburban America.
- ☞ Sparsely populated rural communities are behind the times and not worth our time.

- ☞ Cities are strategic; the country is inconsequential.
- ☞ The best, most visionary pastors are hired by growing visionary congregations.
- ☞ Rural churches can only afford the leftovers from the leadership pool.
- ☞ If you want to be a “successful” pastor, go to the cities.
- ☞ If you want to drive a minivan with 200,000 miles on it, go to the sticks.

Those are “the rules” about the rurals — the unspoken but clearly understood values that permeate American Christianity’s beliefs about churches in the boonies. Oh sure, no one would say them out loud — at least not in public — but don’t tell me that the vast majority of us don’t believe those rules, because, well, I did, and so did everyone around me. I accepted “the rules” hook, line, and sinker. But that was six years ago. Today I have only one thing to say about that: Forget the rules!

Where would thoughts like that come from, anyway? From the God who desires that none should perish? From the One who leaves the 99 to find the one? From the Son who had a carpenter for a dad in a town with a population of less than 500? No way. So if the rules didn’t come from the Way, the Truth, and the Life, they could only ultimately come from the one who steals, kills, and destroys. No doubt the rules are messages sent from the pit by the liar, and today I say it’s time to send them back unopened, stamped “No Such Address,” labeled “permanent delivery failure”!

Listen, God loves rural — no question about it. Most Old Testament prophets were called from a small town. Jesus was born rural and grew up rural. When the invitation to join Him at His banquet table fell on indifferent ears in the cities, Jesus invited small-town people to His party. “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:21 NIV 1984).

Don't get me wrong. I love what God is doing in the metropolitan areas of the world. Most of our mega-churches, TV ministries, and "known" churches are found in larger cities. But let's be honest: churches in the cities that have populations of hundreds of thousands or millions of people should run attendance of thousands. But when God does it in the sticks? When He defies our entrenched church-growth models and gathers seekers and worshipers together en masse in the middle of nowhere? Well, that's when you know God loves rural and that He loves breaking the rules, and that we have nothing to do but worship Him and thank Him for doing the impossible.

I didn't believe that before. I now believe in a God who can do a work in towns of hundreds and still reach thousands. I also believe that the lessons we are learning out here in the rurals could be oxygen and nitro in the burbs and urbs — fuel that could explode in more heavily populated areas — if only someone would provide the spark. Yeah, God loves rural, and so do I . . . at least I do now. My hope is in God and my belief is in the Holy Spirit's movement in rural America and small communities of the world.

Passing by the small farms and little communities each day on my way to the church, I am reminded how this was a vision God held for me. I could have never imagined what He was up to, and so I really resisted at first — almost missing the ride of my life because of the "rules" I believed about "the rurals." The fields I pass, the scattered houses and barns and tractors . . . each one reminds me that this is a field, a mission field, and arguably the greatest mission field. I personally believe that rural America is one of the most over-churched, unreached people groups in the world. The number of church buildings says nothing about the state of Christianity in rural America. We find church buildings on most street corners in small towns. The prairies are dotted with churches everywhere. *But that is part of the problem.* These struggling churches won't survive the next decade if they cannot grow, and rural churches have challenges unique to the ministry, especially if they are

passionate about their family's church heritage (but are not passionate about the mission of Christ) or have great desire but little faith, their vision limited by what they can see, not by Who is unseen.

And here is why: because rural America is perhaps *more churched and more unchurched* than any place on earth. When someone becomes a Christian in China, Uganda, Nigeria, UAE, or in Saudi Arabia, they take the Bible, see it, trust it, and believe every word that is written. You take the Bible to some churches in rural America and there is a tendency to assume ownership of it as if they wrote a portion of it — yet so few read it, so few believe it, and so few follow it. Yes, rural people come from rich church heritages — but so few have experienced the living Cornerstone of the Church, and so the buildings and the congregations are dwindling, falling into disrepair, collapsing.

But that's not the way it has to be. A great harvest for Christ is waiting in the heartland and rural communities of America, and in that harvest are the seeds to reach the world. The people out here in the rurals are strong people, smart people, dedicated people. They are people who know what it means to work — who “get the job done” because they know they must. They know that “if it's broken, it must be fixed” (whether it's 5:00 or not). I'm telling you, in the rurals we know how to make it happen with bare hands, baling wire, and determination. So not only is it a mission field, but it is a field of the best missionaries, too . . . and I tell you this from experience.

In 2003 Southside Baptist, after 50 years of ministry in a town of less than 100 people, was barely surviving with 31 attendees and an annual budget of less than \$45,000. Today we are doing business as “Brand New Church” — and for good reason. At the moment, about 2,000 people gather with us in person. Another 1,500 are registered attendees of our iCampus (joining us from 177 different countries like India, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Spain, South Africa, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines). In the last nine months, we had 63,933 online visitors, and we ministered to another 40,000 through

BNC Global Outreach, and we are rapidly launching satellite churches using, of course, real satellites.

There are days that I sit stunned and wonder: *How did I go through all that? How am I still doing it? I know there is no way on God's green earth that I should still be doing this.* And to be honest, I'm as blown away as anyone. I know where we came from, but in any given moment I'm rarely sure of where we are, and I'm just going with the flow when it comes to the details of where we might be headed.

It's been an amazing journey. By God's grace and plenty of blood, sweat, and tears, we have climbed to some of the most amazing mountaintops and navigated through some of the most unimaginable valleys. In the pages ahead, it will be my humble privilege to share some of the details of our journey with you, a journey that has solidified five key goals of rural ministry into our branding: Vision, Attitude, Leadership, Understanding, and Enduring Excellence. When this level of "V.A.L.U.E." became our reality, our story as a church jumped into light speed.

But please know that this story really isn't about us and our church; it's about you and your church. We all share a common journey in this world. As believers we have always been and always will be connected and dependent as members of the greater Body of Christ, as congregants in the

Pastor Shannon O'Dell (top, right) with the BNC leadership team.





Church. More than ever, this is true in the digital age where followers of Christ across the globe or across the pasture can connect with the click of a mouse.

So ultimately, it's not BNC's story and it's not your story; it's our story, and as such it is an invitation; an invitation to join together and share our tears, our fears, and our resources of vision and hope as we take to the roads and country lanes of America and the world, as we live out the invitation to join Christ at the banquet table. By God's grace, we've been on an amazing journey — one that, by His mercy, may be only beginning, and may be beginning together.

In the following chapter, I provide not only details of our struggles and growth as a church, but videos and links to information that I pray will bless you, your family, your ministry, and your church. These will be scattered among the story of our journey and continuing mission to give God our

very best. A helpful listing of the links will be provided in the appendix at the back for easy reference.

I remember the day I lay in bed and bawled my eyes out because I was praying, “Jesus, please don’t send me to rural America.” But that was a long time ago, back when I used to believe that there were rules about the rural church.

No more.

Now I believe this:

*It’s time to break all the rurals.*



# 2 COUCH



## One White Couch: Answering the Call ... Finally

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, “Away with you!” (Isa. 30:21–22).

“Leave your country and your people,” God said. “And go to the land I will show you” (Acts 7:3).

All was well in the buckle of the Bible Belt. I was serving as a youth pastor in Oklahoma City under an awesome pastor in a great church. Kids and parents thought I was the best. My wife and I and our four kids were comfortably settled in the suburbs, and I was making, with benefits, almost \$60,000 a year. I was traveling to about 11 countries, and the whole world felt within my grasp.

I had served as a student pastor for 11 years, casting vision and discipling students to become engaged Christ followers. Surrounded by like-minded comrades in a well-entrenched suburban Christian sub-culture, I was on track, toeing the line, and life was good. The bottom line is that it was Cush City — and I don't mean in any way to dog the call God gave me up to that point, but the truth is that I had a cream puff job. We had 70 staff members around and I could "hide" at a foosball table and a ping-pong table better than anyone. Not physically hide, but get lost or go essentially unnoticed in the crowds of people and non-stop activity of a large and thriving church.

Sure, everyone was happy and content and it all looked like "success," but whatever it was, it had nothing to do with my vision, my personal walk with God, or passion for Christ. Yet because the building was big, the budget was big, and we were drawing in big numbers of kids and families, people automatically thought I was a worthy authority. I wasn't faking it, but I'm not sure I was very real either. Little did I know that it was all about to change . . . in a big, little way.

### Getting Real

In the spring of 2001, I sensed God's call to lead a church. The voice of God's Spirit was clear, and, to be honest, it really made sense. I was starting to age out of youth ministry and (like multitudes of youth pastors before me) the next professional step was to seek an associate or senior pastor position. I clearly felt that God was leading toward a senior pastor position. Without advertising that I was even looking, people started

telling me about opportunities in metro communities, and I started receiving offers on almost a weekly basis — and they were *good* offers. I had paid my dues, earned my reputation, and now it was time to move up to the big leagues — like a first round draft pick in the NFL. Sweet.

Then in October the phone rang.

“Shyannon Odeyell? Bruce Medley in South Lead Hill Arkansaswwwwwwww callin’.” I knew Bruce from the old days, and he knew my family well. My hometown wasn’t far from where Bruce was calling; it was just south of what people would describe as Sticksville and north of Nowhere. I listened politely as Bruce told me about a small church in the tiny Arkansas community that was looking for a new pastor. I understood what he was talking about all too well. Small town? *Been there; done that; got the T-shirt; moving on.* Man, after high school I put that place in the rearview mirror and never looked back. To return would mean moving 500 miles and what felt like 500 years in the wrong direction. It might as well have been halfway around the world . . . no, scratch that, it was *farther* than that. World missions would have been far less of a stretch than a rural church because that was the very last place I felt God wanted me to be working as a pastor. Out of respect for Bruce and to spiritualize my response, I reluctantly said I would pray about it.

Honestly, I didn’t — didn’t pray about it, that is.

I laughed to myself instead. *My vision, my calling, my future is not in the boonies*, I happily thought to myself. *Maybe near Dallas, or Nashville, or Atlanta*, but I was positive it was not in South Lead Hill, Arkansas. *No one* had a future in South Lead Hill.

Because I was on staff with a Southern Baptist president for several years, offers kept coming in and I was holding out for the best one. Looking back, I can see that my desirableness had nothing to do with integrity or spirituality. It had nothing to do with anything other than because I was in a large church

and people wanted their church to be large, too. Everybody wanted that; so did I. In America, to go from a thriving metro fellowship to a struggling rural church is considered probably the most stupid professional move you can make. Cindy and I had received calls from some of the most unbelievable churches in America. They weren't senior pastor positions, which we believed God was calling me to, so we were not able to say yes to those, but we had opportunities. To be a senior pastor, to cast the vision for a local group, to be the local shepherd for a church organization — it was my call. I felt called to a senior pastor position in a large metro suburban area — to minister in established or thriving middle-to-upper class America. Period.

So I kept praying for God to just show which direction and urban area He wanted me to be living on the fringes of. Since South Lead Hill was farther than half a state away from a large metro area, I dismissed the opportunity almost as soon as Bruce called me, and I went about my way. The idea was so far “out there” (literally and figuratively) I didn't even fight it. It was not an option I even considered. I had a wife, four small children; it just didn't seem to make sense for my ministry, my family, or me. I shrugged the whole thing off and moved on.

But Bruce kept calling. I continued to say I didn't think I was the one God had in mind for them. I even sent some of the most radical videos from my time as a student pastor to prove I was just “too out of the box,” too radical, too over-the-top to be considered. But when Bruce found out I would be in my hometown for the holidays, he asked if I would just come by the church for a few minutes and meet with the search committee. *No harm in that*, I thought. *Let's get this over with so ol' Bruce will give it a rest*. I already had my exit strategy before I drove into the little parking lot. I would go in, say hi, be polite, and I would then gracefully spiritualize my decline, saying I “felt led” to another area.

When I pulled up to the church, all my worst fears and assumptions about rural churches were confirmed. The parsonage was decades out of date, in disrepair, and filled with

mouse droppings. The little church had problems of its own. The parking lot was dirt, with the exception of six parking spots that were memorialized in the concrete. There was only one bathroom, unisex that is, on the upper floor. The pews and carpet were green. The lobby was small with the Sunday school attendance board reading dismally, as well as the giving. Inadequate sound, old upright piano, stains in the ceiling, and the darkest paneling you have ever seen. The church smelled musty . . . you know, like old churches smell — a symbolic scent somewhere between formaldehyde and moth balls. *Shannon, you have real vision*, I reminded myself, *and this ain't it!* I sat through the meeting, answered some questions, and cordially told them, “Thanks, but no thanks.” They responded by asking me to come and give a candidate’s sermon on January 12. *Sheesh. These people just don't get it. Don't they know that my no means no?!* I thought to myself, never once considering that it might be God unveiling His vision for me.

I went and gave a sermon on January 12. But I’m telling you, I pulled out all the corks. I was sure that I could convince them that an off-the-wall, alternative-tending, emerging-leaning, over-the-edge youth pastor was not what this sleepy, traditional fellowship and town needed. So I let them have it . . . all 25 of them who showed up that morning.

My message was entitled “Becoming a Person of Passion.” I shared why I thought the church is passionless today, because so many are involved with Christ but not committed to Him. Quoting Matthew 9:36, I shared how their passion must start with a heart that breaks for those who need to be rescued. I told them about Evan Roberts, a 25-year-old coal miner who shared a message after a Wednesday night service in 1904 to 17 people, exhorting them to:

- ☞ confess every sin known to God
- ☞ remove every doubtful habit from their lives
- ☞ obey the Holy Spirit’s prompting, and
- ☞ go public with their witness for Christ.

In the next 30 days after Roberts' service, 37,000 came to know Christ; 100,000 became believers in the next five months. The revival surged through the colleges, cities, and coal mines. I told them what Roberts said about it all afterwards: "God has so made man, that whenever anything fires his soul, impossibilities vanish."

I talked about embracing the same attitude as Jesus Christ, who left His heavenly stature and came to earth as a bondservant of men. I even went a little bit charismatic on them, exhorting them from 1 Thessalonians 5:19 to not "put out the Spirit's fire!" I told them how spiritual fervor, not human wisdom, must direct our intentions. I told them, "Don't settle for good intentions, but God-led intervention. Don't settle for good activity, but accomplishment." And above all, I told them they must be obedient to the call of God. I finished it all off by quoting Jim Elliot: "God consume these idle sticks in my life that I might burn up for Thee."

As I walked away from that musty little building that day, I knew that I had blown them out for sure. I had played their game; I had toed the line for a hopeful family friend, and I was sure that they would agree I was not the man for this job. As I drove home, I was sure I was leaving the hicks and the sticks in my rearview mirror for good. (What I didn't know was that the sermon I had preached to them was the same message I needed to hear the most myself.)

None of my plans to avoid living in South Lead Hill were working out, and it was looking more and more like I was being invited to this small church in a small town in the middle of nowhere. It was time for desperate measures. I decided to throw out some fleeces — a lot of fleeces — nine to be exact. I made Gideon look like a joke with the length of my list. I insisted that an addition be built on the parsonage. I wanted health insurance. I wanted to eradicate all committees and build ministry teams instead. On and on I went. I was confident that there was no way this little church could or would accept my terms and conditions. And that's what I wanted, of course. I was

31. For a 30-something pastor, rural America is just not cool. It's just not vogue to go to a place with a monster steeple, stale carpet, and ten families of 60-plus-year-olds that are looking to bless the pastor with a blackberry cobbler.

Metro America was calling me; it was better for my family, my ministry, my vision (as well as my pride and reputation, I kept telling myself). I wanted what Bill Hybels and Ed Young had. Nothing wrong with that, but the idealized ministry and church had become an idol in my heart and mind — a gold- and silver-plated image that was taking the place of God in my soul. My fleeces were a desperate attempt to protect my “idol” as I hoped I could have both God and the church I dreamed of.

It didn't work. That little church agreed to every one of my requirements. Yep, each and every one, approved with no problem.

In a revealing conversation with my wife, I realized God had been laying the groundwork for this move to South Lead Hill in her heart even while I was resisting it. Still, I lined up all the reasons one more time why this was a ridiculous idea: not enough people; it is rural, *really* rural. No money in it. No security in it. No leadership. No vision. . . Add it all up and there was no way that church could grow. So I just went back to where I was and waited for the ideal — until one day, months later, when I took a nap and God revealed His plan for me.

### The White Couch

It was November 26, 2002. I was in Mississippi at my in-laws' for Thanksgiving. Good food, good family, and the traditional “wow, that was a huge meal” syndrome. I snuck away from the small talk toward a side room to loosen my belt and sleep off that last piece of pie. No one ever goes in that room, but somehow I ended up there lying on my mother-in-law's white couch. (Who has a white couch anyway?) I kicked up my feet, stretched out, and dozed off. . . .

I am going to tell you right now that I have written more sermon series in my dreams than when I'm awake. I woke up from a dream one night and said to my wife, "Babe, write this down: CheeriO's—Obedience, Obscurity, and Obligation." We wrote down all these *O's* that we have to be cheerful about and I turned it into a series of messages. I know that's not the norm, and some of you are probably back-peddling a bit, wondering if I haven't gone over the edge, but all I can say is that I seem to be more receptive to God's leading when I'm asleep rather than awake — and sometimes He speaks very, very clearly. That day, on the white couch, was one of those times. I heard God whisper, "Shannon, what if I want to use you to blaze a trail to pioneer a work in rural America? What if I want to use you to do that?"

Up to this point, I had considered South Lead Hill an invitation — and not a very attractive one at that. I had pawned it off by thinking that this was just an overly determined little church that was unwilling to take no for an answer. They were inviting me, but that invitation was an option, just like an invitation that someone might get inviting them to a party. But after the white couch, I knew that everything was different. This was not an invitation. This was a call. And a call from God is not an option. So many of us are guilty of confusing God's call with an invitation. It's not an invitation; it's a command from heaven. Over the years I had seen many people negate their call to marriage, to ministry, to their family, etc., by convincing themselves that it was a "take it or leave it" proposition. And I've seen them do it with very grave consequences.

I woke up on the white couch and sat down with Cindy, telling her that I believed God wanted us to pastor at Southside. She gasped and said, "No way. I couldn't live in that parsonage. I couldn't put our kids in a small town school system. Are you serious?" I told her how and what God had spoken, and we both began to weep. We knew it was going to be a lot of work. We knew it was going to be difficult. We knew we were going to be frustrated, and we knew that we would have to pay for it in many different ways.

That call from the couch should have been enough, but Cindy and I had thrown out one last fleece — one I was sure could never be done in a million years. We told the church we must receive a unanimous vote to accept this pastorate. The church's history indicated clearly that this would not take place. It was our fleece out of God's will for our lives. The church had an attendance of 31, but even so, how often will everyone in a church agree to the same thing? Especially when it comes to choosing a pastor? The odds on this one had to be in my favor.

The vote came back 31 yes and 0 no.

God's call had come — and we answered it.



Visit [www.nlpg.com/bnc](http://www.nlpg.com/bnc) and watch the first video, “The Call.”

*Join me as I re-visit our original church building and share important insights on God's call for your life and ministry.*

### No Refrigerator Magnets

Cool things happen in churches for most people when they announce that they have been called.

One of my friends felt God's leading to a rural village in Senegal, West Africa. When he told his friends and family about this call, they wept, cried, and celebrated. The local churches began to pray for him. The denominational convention supported him financially, funding not only a comfortable salary and retirement account, but making sure that they were covered for their education and processing expenses as well. They spent about \$10,000 to send them off with an inspiring commissioning service. They sent him care packages, prayer letters, and made it a priority to include him and his family on the Wednesday night prayer list. I thought the support they gave him was just awesome; it was much-needed financially,

spiritually, and emotionally. As a final display of enduring commitment, hundreds of families put prayer magnets with my friend's picture on their fridge to remind them to pray for this missionary family.

When we announced our call to South Lead Hill, people laughed. They laughed as if we had told some sort of joke. Some just shook their heads, trying to make it compute. Family and friends looked at us with furrowed brows. "Why are you taking a huge pay cut?" "Why move your family to the middle of nowhere?" They sat there and said, "Oh, dude, that isn't a good move financially; that is not really wise for your family. Where are your kids going to go to school? How can you do this?"

In the end, no one gave us a red cent to go. We never made the Wednesday night prayer list. No one stepped up to send us care packages. No one sent us off with a commissioning. And, significantly and symbolically, we never did end up on a refrigerator magnet.

Because of the rules about the rurals, I'm afraid that this response is all too common for the rural pastor and his family.



Southside Baptist Church in South Lead Hill, AR (population 93)

Yeah, we say that we support rural pastors, and we verbally affirm the importance of what they're doing . . . but do we really? When rural pastors come and go, we usually smile politely, pat them on the back, and walk away just really thankful that we don't have to do what they do where they are doing it. If a man is going to North Atlanta or the Grapevine, Texas, area, everyone understands that and everybody gets behind it because it makes sense. But if you get called to the sticks of Arkansas, people think you are a freak or destined for obscurity and status quo.

It's hard to describe the rainbow of emotions that we felt during those days. I felt like I was wearing overalls at the country club . . . we had broken the rules and we just didn't fit anymore. It wasn't all bad to be sure, but in many ways we felt patronized, marginalized, misunderstood — and alone. I guess no one should be surprised when the call of God leads him or her first into the deserts of loneliness. Moses went there, Jesus went there, Paul went there . . . other men who have followed God's call have walked there. Why should I have expected anything different?

When we finally accepted the call — when it finally soaked in that it was going to happen — my wife and I cried. We bawled. God called us to rural America. We knew it was our calling but we wept. We would leave Oklahoma City and our church of 4,000. We were going to South Lead Hill, Arkansas, population 88 — and we were going alone.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Just so you know, it doesn't have to be this way anymore. Sure, we might be isolated geographically, but there's absolutely no reason that we can't be networking together as pastors of churches in small communities and sharing resources, encouragement, wisdom, and vision. We don't have to do it alone anymore. You'll hear more about this in later chapters, but if you want to, go ahead and log on to [brandnewchurch.com](http://brandnewchurch.com) and let's get connected, now.



# 3

## DESERT



### Desert Days: Finding a Place in Nowhere

For I am about to do a brand-new thing. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness for my people to come home. I will create rivers for them in the desert! (Isa. 43:19 *NLT*).

I slowly walked down the small, dark, and narrow hallway, past the unisex-only upstairs bathroom, and slowly pushed the door open. A mixture of anticipation and reality made my stomach feel funny. The carpet and paneled walls were decades old and worn; the computer, the desk, and the chair were dinosaurs in their own right. The bookshelves were full of old

hymnals, old church training material, dusty cassette tapes of messages from previous pastors, and VBS material. This was the perfect picture of what I knew would be the passions of the congregation I was to lead. This was my “new” office. This is where it would all start.

We all know that rural churches face dwindling attendance and aging attendees. With young people making plans to be anywhere but church come Sunday morning or Wednesday night, these churches are on a steady decline. Struggling to keep the doors open, small churches do not have funds for large and aesthetically correct buildings or even the remodeling of an old building. That’s their reality. Now it was my reality. I plopped down in the squeaky chair, took a deep breath, and surveyed the surroundings. *“What now, Lord?”* It was Day 1 at Southside Baptist, and I had found the way to my own “backside of the desert.” I knew that we had much, much work ahead, but where to start? *Sunday, I guess. Let’s start with the Sunday service.*



Go to [www.nlpg.com/bnc](http://www.nlpg.com/bnc) and watch “Day One” as I describe the challenges of our first days in ministry at South Lead Hill.

*The first day, or even the moment when you know something needs to change, is an opportunity to be expectant about God moving in your ministry.*

### It's Sunday, But Monday is Coming

I had gotten a sense of Southside Sundays when I had done my candidate’s sermon weeks before. On most Sundays, there were 11 people in the choir and about 26 or so people in the congregation. About one-half of the congregation in the choir would be the dream of most music directors. Our minister of music did everything she could to make it the best, but it was

a struggle . . . kind of like herding cats. For starters, the organ player was completely deaf. Seriously. He could not hear at all. He was the nicest guy (God rest his soul, he earned it), but he and the music director would have to give head nods and hand signals to stay on the same beat, because this poor guy had no idea where she was at. When his song was over, she would look at him, give him the signal, and they would try to cut off the song together.

Logistically, there were other immediate concerns regarding the music. After I got up to pray after the hymns, I would say, “Amen,” and the whole choir would get up and shift to their seats in the pews. It took forever, and they would make so much noise I don’t think anybody ever heard the first 20 minutes of my message. The transition probably would’ve gone faster if they had sat down just anywhere, but each of them had their own seats, unofficially reserved, and they all had to sit in the same place they had for who knows how many years and decades. Force of habit inadvertently got in the way of the quality of the service.

And then we had technology issues (our “technology” consisting of two microphones and a tape recorder). We needed to make recordings for the church members who were shut-ins at a nursing home, but initially I was the only one who knew how to push the right button. So I would ask the music director to pray at the close of every song set. That way I could get up and run to the sound booth at the back of the church and hit the record button. We had a “sound man,” but I’d always find him lying down asleep — every Sunday. They had built this really nice sound booth so he wouldn’t be disturbed by the service, I guess. So anyway, I’d run to the back, hit the button, try not to wake the sound guy, and then run back up the aisle hoping our music director hadn’t finished the prayer yet so I didn’t get caught in the rush of choir members heading for their pews. I always hoped I wouldn’t accidentally take out the organ player, because he couldn’t hear me coming and it was a real tight little aisle about as wide as my hips.

That's where we started; that's what happened every Sunday. I would jump up on the stage and think, *God, is there any way on earth this place is going to grow?* (We did grow that first week, though, from 31 to 33 — a remarkable 8 percent growth!) No doubt it was a very sobering start. If the past 50 years had taught them anything, and if those first weeks had taught me anything, it was that change would not come easy, naturally, or randomly. If things were to change, we would have to be intentional, and God would have to be faithful. I learned right away that if you want to go somewhere else, you have to start where you are, and God is ready to meet you on the backside of your own desert. But at the same time, we, as leaders, must be willing to make the four most difficult decisions required for a rural pastor who desires to see the church go to the next level:

### Four Most Difficult Decisions for a Rural Pastor

- 1 To pastor in Rural America . . . with low incomes, low resources, and low expectation
- 2 To reach the lost and unchurched. (Most people say they want to reach the lost . . . until they do and then the church starts changing!)
- 3 To equip the church with accurate and healthy structure . . . changing bylaws, constitutions, and church policy as necessary
- 4 To remove "Holy Cows" to be more effective . . . such as pews, property, and people

We had faced the first decision after the "white couch incident." We had packed up, charged ahead, and were jumping in with both feet. But the other three decisions were still ahead

of us. How do we do it? How do we proceed? As I pondered these questions, God spoke very clearly to me again: “When you desire to grow a congregation, you will never get it. But if you grow congregants, then you are going to see transformation in their lives and within the church.” It was one of the most important distinctions of my journey. In all my thinking before South Lead Hill, I had wanted to grow a big congregation. But that was putting the cart before the horse. I realized I needed to be focusing on growing individual congregants, not a big congregation.

When we were about six weeks in, I was getting frustrated with the lack of participation. I finally realized that the congregants were not capable of doing the job because they did not have a passion for Christ — and I finally realized I really have to love people. Throwing down some creative relevant talk wasn’t going to change their lives. I had to lead with my life. So I started by sharing the gospel. I had the opportunity to lead a guy to Christ, then I led another guy to Christ, then another guy to Christ, and all of a sudden life transformations were happening. I can’t tell you how huge that was. When a person has been church-ed and *then* they’re changed? Genuine transformation communicates big time in a small community, and it started to get everyone’s attention. The church started growing.

Then I started casting a vision for what I desired to see. I started introducing worship once in a while, or I would flash a PowerPoint slide up on the screen. Everyone thought I was Houdini. Wow, how did he do that? In about a year we were running 90. It was awesome! I mean, it looked like the place was packed. According to the deacons, we could seat 275 people in the building. But I did a test one time and tried to put seven people on a row that supposedly would seat nine. Not a chance that was going to work. I determined that the building could only seat about 180. So when God grew that congregation to about 200 people, I had this great vision to build a building — a real building. It was a 1.1-million-dollar plan and would seat

about 400 people. *Pretty impressive in a town of 88*, I thought. That was a powerful vision.

Just one problem: it wasn't God's vision.

The process of bringing this building to reality was slow and painful. We paid an architect and went through some of the most unbelievably boring planning meetings — I'm talking verbal chloroform. The big discussion was where to place the breaker box. Week after week we debated. I just about went nuts, but that's the way we had to make decisions because that's the way the church was structured: *everyone* had to vote on *everything*.

During one business meeting there was a guy who had investigated what type of coffeepot we should get now that 90+ were coming. So several prayed and fasted about it (sorry, a cynical exaggeration to illustrate the energy and focus on one insignificant decision) and then discussed it for at least two months (no exaggeration at all). In the end they picked a handsome three-pot Bunn coffeemaker. Motion made, seconded, and all in favor ready to say "Aye" when a lady raised her hand and said, "I just don't feel comfortable having the word 'bun' on our coffee maker." I was stunned. I said, "It doesn't say 'buns.' It just says 'Bunn.'" I knew that she had read *Left Behind* and didn't have a problem with it. (Wouldn't it have been awesome if they had made the sequel to that *Right Behind*? I would have loved that, no buts about it.) Anyway, God be praised, she dropped her concern so we could move on without making a motion to amend the decision. I'm telling you, though, I was getting impatient. I know that most churches have their own versions of the breaker-box-Bunn-battles, but I, for one, was getting very annoyed with it all. But again, I knew I wasn't just invited here — I was *called* here, and that call superseded my annoyance.

When that was all going down, we also instituted a student ministry project. We wanted to do something big and rowdy for all the kids, but we didn't have the space. So we made a

proposal to the deacons: if we get more than 60 kids coming on Wednesdays, can we remove the pews and replace them with stackable chairs so the youth could use that area? Only seven students were in the church, so I'm guessing nobody took the proposal too seriously. They said, "Sure! If you get over 60, then we'll pull the pews out." We voted on it as church and in a unanimous decision, all agreed. Little did they know, a huge, huge sacred cow was on its way to the slaughter.

Southside had rabidly protected its sacred cows before, I would learn. They had once voted down a sand volleyball court that the pastor wanted to build to draw in more kids from the neighborhood. They voted it down because someone had memorialized the dirt that had been brought in to level off a potential parking lot. No joke. Memorialized dirt. But that was nothing. Our pews were like most rural churches' pews. They had little plaques on them, memorials to deceased and beloved ancestors whose memory and honor lay etched in the little strips of brass. Why did they agree that we could take them out? I'll never know for sure. Maybe they never thought it would happen; maybe they were reluctant to make a stink about it in the moment. Everyone seemed to be on board, but in reality, I had just lit the fuse on a time bomb.



*Take a moment and view "Change = Conflict" at [www.nlpg.com/bnc](http://www.nlpg.com/bnc).*

*It's not always easy to implement change in your ministry at a church with deeply ingrained traditions. Change often means some conflict, but change is vital in fulfilling God's call in your life.*

### **Brick and Mortar Blessings**

Meanwhile, I was still trying to plow ahead with my vision for building a new church. Step by tortured step we were making some progress. We even had a ground-breaking ceremony. But we were still arguing so much on where the

breaker box was going to be that the whole process had backed up. *Every* meeting they would come to debate it. I know you think I'm joking but I'm not. Then God, in His infinite mercy, in His own perfect timing, revealed *His* vision for our church.

Down the road apiece, Elixir Baptist Church was struggling to keep its doors open. They were down to about six attendees, about \$17,000 in debt, and had been unsuccessful in recruiting a new pastor (a situation that many rural churches face). "Would you take over our building that seats about 125 people?" they asked. They were doing what so many rural churches need to do: give in without giving up. Elixir was willing to "give in" to another area organization that would allow them to "go on" and flourish and succeed. We took that opportunity before the deacons: what if, rather than building, we expanded to two campuses? Amazingly, the idea sailed through. When it came to a vote, it was clear to all that God's hand was in the matter. He had provided a building for nothing and saved us not only from our sins, but also from further breaker-box debate. Furthermore, it was a huge step up in the population base we were serving. The church was about nine miles away in the metropolis of Bergman. They had a real restaurant and even a gas station, population: 472.

### A Little Mud on the Bylaws

Vote by vote we were making some progress. Even before we added the second campus, the church was really, really growing. God was truly blessing us. But more than ever, I was realizing the need for a biblically accurate church leadership structure that would allow us to move more decisively and more quickly. We had survived the breaker box, but when the parking lot almost killed us, I realized that we were seriously stuck in the mud, literally. The ground outside the original church was a soggy, muddy mess when it rained. In our meetings we discussed and debated and proposed solutions, but before anything could get done, we were not only knee-deep in mud

but up to our ears in subcommittees. *Somebody could have just ordered a truckload of gravel five months ago!* I thought. But we couldn't do it. It had to be approved. We were about two years in at this point, and we were approaching some important crossroads involving worship, staffing, and a few other key areas of our branding. I knew we would never get past these intersections under our current "discuss, debate, and vote" congregationally led system.



*Re-focus your priorities in the midst of daily challenges. Watch "Clarity of the Call" at [www.nlpg.com/bnc](http://www.nlpg.com/bnc).*

*Discover the difference between an invitation and God's call for our lives, and how this powerful principle guides you in keeping the daily struggles in perspective.*

So I went to the deacons and said, "Hey, what if we develop a team of individuals to research the constitution and bylaws of the church and see what we would need to change to allow us to work most efficiently and (most importantly) most biblically?" They were like, "That would be awesome!" (In all honesty, they didn't even know what the current constitution said, and in all honesty, I didn't let on where I knew this process would take us.) They let me pick my own research team, and I chose five men that I knew were of like mind who would be willing to let God's Word speak for itself. We started researching bylaws and biblically based constitutions from churches of every size from every denomination. Some churches had 1 page of bylaws and some had 50. We looked most seriously at the structures of some of the fastest-growing congregations in the country, and in less than two months, we came up with about seven pages of our own.<sup>1</sup> Some of the key elements:

1. Feel free to download a copy of our constitution and bylaws at [brandnewchurch.com](http://brandnewchurch.com). And if you're up for it, feel free to join the discussion on the forum attached to that site. Deciding to get the right structure, I believe, is one of the four most important decisions that a rural pastor must make. If we can help you along that process in any way, we would love to.

We changed the title “deacon” to “servant leader” (*deaconos*). In your neck of the woods and too often in other places, people think “deacon” means “I am in charge.” That isn’t what it means; it means “I am a servant.”

We added a “trustee team.” There are no biblical requirements on that one. We say you just have to love God and have a passion for your church. No distinction between female or male; we just need people in there who can help us that have a loyalty to the vision and enough passion for God to get on board with it.

Then we created an “elder board,” the *episkopos*, which makes up our staff. They are the leaders of the church — the decision makers who vote on just four things: (1) the calling of the senior pastor, (2) the buying or selling of any real estate, (3) the election of trustees, and (4) the yearly budget.

We proposed the new bylaws on February 11, 2005. According to *Robert’s Rules of Order*, we tabled them for a month to give everyone a chance to take a good look. They didn’t. The night before the next meeting a few people started reading it and I started getting calls saying, “Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa! It looks like you are getting too much power.”

The next night at the meeting, I did my best to explain. I said, “It isn’t about power; it is about accurate structure.” We talked Bible for a bit then I gave some illustrations. “Most rural pastors may hear from God but they can’t go forward because someone else is leading the church other than them. Listen, a pilot needs to be able to fly the airplane. If he needs to push the throttles up to make it over the next mountain range, does he go back and take a vote from the passengers? You’re telling me you trust me with your kids’ salvation, with marrying your grandkids, with baptizing your wife . . . but you don’t trust me enough to lead in the way we are going to go? If a doctor is doing a surgery and there are complications, he needs to be able to fix it right there on the spot. What does he do, go out and

take a poll and say, ‘Um, excuse me, this guy is hemorrhaging pretty bad. I think it’ll take about an extra \$4,134.99 to stop the bleeding. All in favor say, “Aye.” Opposed? Same sign’.”

The discussion that day was lively but civil. There was plenty of disagreement. The whole proposal would likely have been stonewalled if people had read the bylaws earlier. I’m sure, given the chance, they would have mobilized their opposition more aggressively. But it didn’t happen; they didn’t have the time. Still, that day was our first time during our tenure at the church to have no votes; but there weren’t enough to stop the change. We had done it. In 90 days we radically changed the way things had been done for more than 50 years.

At the same time, other important factors were also coming together: the new campus, the new youth initiative, some progressive innovations in our worship — everything began to synergize under this new leadership structure, and all of a sudden everything took off. The new, biblical framework was the launching pad that took us to the next level.

### **Flying High, Crashing Hard**

We had less than 30 days to fix up the new church building. By default we called it the “South Campus,” and it needed a ton of work. We dressed it up aesthetically as best we could, and we had our first service in it March 30, 2005. The logistics were crazy, but it worked! We staggered the schedules and alternated the worship service and Sunday school times so I could blitz between the two buildings. We had been averaging about 190 at the North Campus, but that first week we packed out the South Campus, too, effectively growing from 200 to 300 overnight. It was transformed life after transformed life. I was totally jazzed.

We did the first major Wednesday youth night about the same time. It was just like the old days in Oklahoma: crazy fun, loud music, and a soul-searching message. When we counted heads, we came up with 81 kids who were literally jumping the pews that evening (you know where this is headed, don’t

you?) — 81 kids: 21 more than required by the vote the month before that said the pews with the plaques could be removed. I thought that was all settled, so we started ordering chairs. We had \$50,000 in the fund for the building we were going to build, so we ordered some nice chairs that would come in a couple months and then ran off to the nearest Lowes to get a pile of temporary plastic ones.

When we started unscrewing pews, there was an eruption of anger on a scale of which I could have never imagined. Bruce had called charter members of the congregation to let them know what was going on. (Sensitive as I was, I thought some of them might want a pew for their home or farm — kind of a keepsake from decades past.) He took the first wave of fury over the phone, and then they descended on him at the church. He's a bulldog, and he squared off with them face to face. I had never heard of anything like it in my life: three or four families yelling and screaming and crying about their mother or grandfather. (I don't know why people blame everything on their dead relatives, but man, they were going for it.)

When I caught news of it, I was stunned. I tried to tell them they were welcome to take the pews with their memorialized plaques, or we could take the plaques off for them. Bruce pulled out the minutes to the last meeting and said, "Listen, you voted for this!" I tried to smooth things over, but the damage was already done. They responded as if I had dug up Grandpa's grave and spit on his casket. *Dang! What is it with this memorial thing?* We even had a little clock in the church that probably cost seven dollars; it had its own plaque reading "In loving memory of so-and-so." *What happens if I move that thing?*

It felt like our *Titanic* had hit the iceberg. Just when we thought we were getting to the bottom of the issue, the pews turned out to be just the tip. I was soon to find out that frustration and dissension floated far, far beneath the surface. The congregation would vote yes and smile to my face, then badmouth the decision outside the meeting. Change was coming hard, our progress was screwing with their past, and

resentment was running very, very deep — which is no surprise now, but it was a shock to me then. After all, this was my first pastorate; I thought everyone was on board; I thought everyone's smiles and nods told the truth. I also thought I wanted to be the top dog, but then I found out that the one in the lead is the one with the target painted on his back. (No more hiding behind foosball tables!)

The next Sunday, you would have thought the devil was at the South Lead Hill campus, and I was the devil. Three or four families showed up. Some of the families had already left, never to return. Some returned for a while, probably thinking, *Okay, it is not over yet; we can still run him off.* I began to realize that they hired me thinking they wanted change, but they really didn't. They wanted to be engaged to change and stay married to their traditions. Such tradition requires a trade — a swapping of fresh ideas and progress for the certainty and control of the status quo. I began to realize that many struggling rural churches don't want a real pastor to lead them; they just want a pacifier to nurse them through the years.

The mass exodus from South Lead Hill was the hardest thing I had ever experienced in my life — the first real cut of rejection, the shedding of the first drops of the blood of failure. I went home and bawled. Disillusioned, defensive, wounded, I was ready to pack up and head out. Many churches were still calling me about a pastor position, some really, really nice ones offering great pay, cars, and housing allowances . . . and always willing to pay our moving expenses. I still believed that rural America was the greatest mission on earth, but during that season I was not at all sure I wanted to pay the price to be used to reach it. I would be crying in my office when someone would call and tell me that I had robbed their family, I had stolen their life. One family actually accused me of killing their mother. She died shortly after the pew incident, and they were insistent that the stress I had caused was the reason. Then I'd go home and listen to a string of dirty, accusatory messages on the phone. *Is this really worth it?* I thought.



*I share what I learned from these challenges in “Prepare to Lead” at [www.nlpg.com/bnc](http://www.nlpg.com/bnc).*

*It is vital that you be ready to make the hard decisions to fulfill God’s call, which also make you a target for those who do not support your vision.*

I stood on the fence, not knowing whether to stay and fight or shake the dust from my feet and walk. But I was also learning — learning valuable lessons, learning what they never tell you about rural ministry:

. . . and I was never told that, as a rural pastor, I was going to be hated. And as a hated man, I was never told that Vision, Attitude, Leadership, Understanding, and Enduring Excellence would be necessary not only to thrive but just to survive.

### **What They Never Told Me about Rural Ministry**

- ☞ It was the most difficult job on earth.
- ☞ Friends would become enemies.
- ☞ That the people who left my church were going to be glaring at me in the check-out lane of Wal-Mart for the rest of my life.
- ☞ I was going to be thrown in the pit.
- ☞ A red-hot marriage was a must for being an effective rural pastor.
- ☞ Scripture never gives us qualifications for the office, but it gives us tons of Scriptures for the home.

Tears flowed like spring creeks during that season. It seemed like the end of the road, but the journey had really just begun.