



A Big Gospel in Small Places *Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters*

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Christian ministries increasingly prioritize urban areas—big cities and suburbs are considered more strategic, more influential, and more desirable places to live and work. As a ministry strategy, focusing on big places makes sense. But the gospel of Jesus is often unstrategic. Pastor Stephen Witmer, using helpful stories and practical advice, lays out an integrated theological vision for small-place ministry today.

What About Small-Place Ministry?

My church, Pepperell Christian Fellowship, is a nondenominational church on Main Street in the town of Pepperell, Massachusetts, an hour northwest of Boston and just minutes from the New Hampshire border. You've probably never heard of Pepperell. It's not a place people travel to so much as one they travel through. It's a former mill town of twelve thousand people with a rural vibe. There are abundant horse farms, numerous fruit and vegetable stands, excellent fly fishing, and no stop lights. Each year in the Fourth of July parade a fleet of gleaming, refurbished tractors chugs up Main Street. One summer not long ago, a moose ambled through town (that was, admittedly, unusual!). When I step outside my front door at night, it's dark and quiet, and I can see the stars. Few cars drive past. Once, on my way back across the street from our mailbox late at night, I lay down in the middle of the road just to see what it would feel like.

The truth is that before coming to Pepperell, I wasn't trying to get to a small town. I hadn't experienced a dramatic change in my understanding of ministry. I hadn't suddenly felt a pressing burden for small places. On the contrary, it was God's clear, unexpected call to one particular small-town church that has slowly, sometimes painfully, led to a change in my understanding of ministry and place and to a passion for seeing small places reached with the gospel.

A decade in Pepperell has led me to rethink, refeel, and reimagine some things. It has caused me to reexamine the Bible, seeking to root my views, feelings, and aspirations in the gospel rather than in what I've absorbed from popular culture. It's forced me to reckon with personal pride and ambition as well as my long-time acceptance of some questionable understandings of city and country.

I've also realized that in going from big to small I've been swimming against not just the current of my own aspirations but that of evangelicalism, which seems to be increasingly prioritizing city ministry. In the past several decades, evangelicals have responded to the massive needs and opportunities created by a major shift of worldwide populations into urban areas. In the 1970s the Southern Baptist Convention focused more intently on planting urban and ethnic churches and saw a major increase in the number of those churches, from one thousand congregations among ethnic groups in 1970 to 2,074 in 1980.² Throughout the 1980s the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization sponsored numerous consultations in urban centers around the world. In 1989, Tim Keller moved to Manhattan to plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church, which grew rapidly and launched Redeemer City to City, a church-planting ministry that aims to start gospel movements in cities. More recently, the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has prioritized urban church planting through its strategy of focusing on thirty-two Send Cities, cities "with the greatest spiritual need and potential influence throughout North America." This is just a small sampling of an increasingly urban ministry focus. Observers have noticed a massive shift from suburban planting to urban planting in recent years. One writer notes that "since the 1990s, evangelicals have increasingly focused on 'strategic' church planting in elite centers of cultural impact" and that "emerging evangelicalism [has] a decidedly urban focus and feel." An urban church planter says, "Everyone's planting in the heart of the city."



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Stephen Witmer (PhD, University of Cambridge) is the pastor of Pepperell Christian Fellowship, Massachusetts and is an adjunct professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is also the cofounder of Small Town Summits, an organization that serves rural churches and pastors. Witmer is the author of *Revelation: A 12-Week Study*, *Jonah: Depths of Grace*, and *Eternity Changes Everything*. He has written for *Bible Study Magazine*, *Reformation 21*, the Gospel Coalition, and *Desiring God*. He lives in Pepperell, Massachusetts, with his wife, Emma, and their three children.

Well, not me. My life has gone a different direction, and ministry in a small town has stirred deep desires in me. I want to know how best to reach the small place where God has sent me. I want to better understand its unique opportunities and be more equipped to do something about its unique challenges. I want to care more about this place and its people than I already do. Small-town ministry (like ministry anywhere) is *hard*. Over the past decade I've agonized with hurting people, puzzled how to help struggling people, and felt anxiety about angry people. So I want to know that what I'm doing counts. I want to know deep in my bones that it's not a waste for me to minister on the periphery in this small, unknown town rather than in the center of things in a great city. I want to understand the evangelical prioritizing of the city and how my small-town ministry fits in.

Is it true that the apostle Paul and other early Christian missionaries focused exclusively on city ministry, entirely avoiding the countryside? If so, did they do so for strategic reasons, believing that if the gospel captured the influential cities it would eventually spread to the surrounding small towns and countryside? If so, is this strategy of establishing urban beachheads also the most effective method for our own day and culture? Does the Bible teach that the world began in a garden (Eden) and will end in a city (the new Jerusalem)—and if so, is that end-time urban future a reason for me to devote my life to city ministry in the present? Though I've heard and read people I deeply respect making all these points as part of a case for prioritizing city ministry in our day, I've never seen a careful, probing assessment of these claims. I hope that will be one contribution of this book.

My deep desire to understand and appreciate the importance of the small-place ministry God has called me to has led me to seek out other small-place ministers in order to learn from their experiences. Over the past several years I've been challenged and inspired by small-town and rural pastors and Christian workers from the coalfields of West Virginia to the plains of Wyoming, from the valleys of Wales to the countryside of Ireland and the villages of northern Uganda. I've corresponded and prayed and worshiped and partnered with churches and pastors who are changing their small communities in North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Pennsylvania. Closer to home, a couple of friends and I have launched Small Town Summits, an initiative that seeks to resource and encourage those who minister in the small places of our region. As we've gathered with small-town laypeople, ministry leaders, and pastors from all over New England, we've learned of the struggles faced by those who pour their lives into tiny places. We've also been amazed by the choice servants God has called to largely forgotten and spiritually hardened villages and hamlets.

While I've learned a lot, it turns out my experience in small-town ministry hasn't so much resulted in the discovery of things I didn't know as in the rediscovery of things I once knew. I've come to see afresh the beauty and brokenness of small places—the one in which I now live as well as others around the world and throughout history. I've slowly come to view these places through a biblical lens, with a gospel-centered theological vision, more like God sees them. I long to communicate this vision in this book.

—Adapted from the introduction



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