

## **The Church on the Wild Rivers Coast: A Research and Survey Project**

Presented in cooperation with Global Church Ministries

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### **Introduction**

The Wild Rivers Coast (WRC) is a geographic area extending from the Klamath River in extreme northwestern California to the mouth of the Umpqua River in southwestern Oregon. It is home to approximately 125,000 people living in small towns and tribal lands spread over 4,650 square miles.

This research and survey project focused on three basic objectives: To understand the status of existing churches; to appreciate existing church/community interactions; and to make a meaningful contribution to the growing national small town church movement.

The ultimate goal is the creation of opportunities for networking, collaboration, and other interactions that strengthen and supplement the efforts of individual churches and church leaders. Additional information on the background of this project can be found on our website ([collabdev.org](http://collabdev.org)).

### **Design of the Survey**

The survey is designed to capture the perspective of Pastors and leaders regarding their church and community, and is organized as follows:

- Sections 1 & 2: Small Town and Small Town Church Assets
- Sections 3 & 4: Small Town and Small Town Church Challenges
- Section 5: The Small Town Church and the Wider Body of Christ
- Section 6: Information on Participating Churches.

### **Description of the Process**

Initial research was conducted to create a database of Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant churches in the study area. Several churches initially included were dropped because it was difficult to confirm their ongoing function, and there may be other churches in the study area that were missed. Ultimately, 100 churches were identified and included.

Pastors and church leaders from this list were introduced to the survey through an initial mailing, then through a series of emails and phone calls. Pastors known to the researcher were asked to encourage those in their network to participate. Near the close of the survey period, a second mailing was sent followed by a final round of emails and phone calls. As a result of this process we received 35 responses from 32 churches.

## The Balance of this Report

Following this introductory section is an initial list of Significant Insights from the survey responses (pp. 2 - 3). Next is a Summary of the Survey Data by Section (pp. 3 – 7), including commentary by the researcher, followed by a list of Resources & References (pp. 7 - 10) for those who want to connect with others or are interested in ongoing research. Finally, the actual Survey Data is included as a PDF document.

## Next Steps

This report will be shared via email to all participants, along with several others involved in ministry or research focused on small towns. It is the hope of this researcher that this information will spur further conversation and collaboration both along the WRC and as part of the national dialogue concerning small town churches.

## Significant Insights

The following insights seemed particularly important to this researcher, although others might draw different conclusions after reviewing the actual **Survey Data**. Feedback, discussion, and critique on these issues and others is always welcomed and encouraged. The following topics are highlighted:

- There are a lot of churches, but the estimated attendees only represent a small percentage of the population (see Q1 & Q58 below). This presents a significant opportunity for outreach and church planting, especially for church leaders who desire to establish a network of churches along the WRC.
- The most significant asset and unique opportunity for small town churches is the ability to enjoy true community and greater intimacy in relationships. “Being known” is a special quality in small town church and an advantage they have over churches in other settings (see Q3, Q13, Q18, & Q55 below). How can this be leveraged in an increasingly isolated world, and how can church programs and structures take advantage of this opportunity?
- Like other small town churches, the churches along the WRC could make a disproportionate impact and have significant influence in their respective communities. In many towns the church represents the largest organized group. However, while a large majority agreed that their church was very visible in the community (see Q15), fewer felt that they were recognized as a valuable resource (see Q16), and only a slight majority agreed that there is cooperation between congregations (see Q 14). This lack of cooperation represents a loss of opportunity and is in contrast with research done by others (see articles by Hagen and Meador in **Resources & References** below)
- When asked about the struggles in their communities, Pastors focused on the practical and physical. Poverty, employment, and the economy were listed as the primary challenge, along with drugs and alcohol and health care (see Q26 & Q37). As mentioned in the summary comments below, what should the role of the church be in addressing these issues, if any?
- Pastors did not feel their churches struggled with most issues common to other small town churches (see summary of Section 4 below). What factors contribute to this “success,” and how can other churches learn from those along the WRC? What challenges exist that were not addressed by the survey?

- The responses to “Section 5: The Small Town Church and the Wider Body of Christ” (see below) uncovered significant issues and would warrant further conversation and additional, more focused research. In particular, it was interesting to note that respondents were unaware of the renewed interest in small town churches (see Q48 below) and that they feel case studies (Q53), creative approaches to education (Q52), and local conferences/training (Q 50) would be beneficial.
- The small towns along the WRC are scenic communities. This is a designation developed in a 2006 study by the Carsey Institute which suggested that small town communities fall into three categories: Remote isolated communities, re-migration communities where young people return to raise families, or scenic communities attractive to tourists and/or retirees. Pastors surveyed clearly agreed that their towns fall into the latter category (see Q9 & Q12 below), so we should look to similar small towns for case studies, other data, and strategies (study source: <https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Rural-Matters-Why-Church-Planting.pdf>).

## **A Summary of the Survey Data by Section**

### **Respondents (Q1 & Q2)**

- As noted above, we received 35 responses from 32 churches, or roughly 1/3 of our list. Twelve churches were from Del Norte County, ten from Curry County, six from Coos County and four from western Douglas County. Since a large percentage of the respondents were from Del Norte County the information gathered will favor that region and may not be reflective of the entire WRC. Refer to the **Survey Data** for the actual list of respondents
- Assuming a population of 125,000 across the study area, there is at least one church for every 1,250 people. A rough estimate of attendance indicates that these churches may be reaching less than 10% of the population. See additional comments below under Section 6, Q58.

### **Section 1: Small Town Assets**

- Questions 3 – 12 capture perspectives on assets typically associated with small town life. In general, the responses were consistent with research done by others regarding the nature of small town communities (see **Resources & References** below). Several results are worth mentioning specifically:
  - *Q3: We enjoy a sense of friendliness and community* – 91.17% agreed or strongly agreed. The responses to this statement reflect one of the most consistent perspectives in the survey, as noted in our **Significant Insights** above.
  - *Q7: The cost of living is reasonable* – only 50% agreed or strongly agreed. Particularly in Brookings, the WRC appears to be different than other small town and rural areas.
  - *Q9: We are surrounded by natural beauty and enjoy easy access to outdoor recreational activities* – 100% agreed or strongly agreed. Along with Q12, in which 55% indicated that scenic beauty is the primary asset of the WRC, it’s clear that our small towns are “scenic communities,” as mentioned in our **Significant Insights** above.

- *Q11: There is low crime and personal safety* – 59% agreed or strongly agreed, while 41% were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. The majority of the neutral or negative respondents were from the Crescent City area.

## Section 2: Small Town Church Assets

- Questions 13 – 20 capture perspectives on assets typically associated with small town and rural churches. Some responses were consistent with the research findings of others while several differed significantly. Specifically:
  - *Q13: Our church enjoys a sense of family and relational priority* – 90.91% agreed or strongly agreed. As mentioned regarding Q3, the responses to this statement reflect one of the most consistent perspectives in the survey, as noted in our **Significant Insights** above.
  - *Q14: There is cooperation between local congregations* – only 51% agreed or strongly agreed. In other research, cooperation is a significant feature of small town church communities, but this is in contrast to our findings.
  - *Q16: Our church is seen as a valuable resource by the community* – only 54% agreed or strongly agreed. Because of the clear opportunity for disproportionate impact and influence, as noted in our **Significant Insights** above, this low number is a cause for concern.
  - *Q17: Deep loyalty and commitment to denominational roots* – only 42% agreed or strongly agreed. This is in contrast to other small town research, which indicates that the majority of churches have strong denominational ties and independent or non-denominational churches are rare.
  - *Q19: New opportunities to reach ethnic minorities* – only 3% agreed or strongly agreed. It is assumed that this is reflective of the monocultural nature of the WRC, but a study of actual demographic data may be useful to test this perspective.
  - *Q20: We engage with local community organizations* – 72% answered yes. Of the 27 responses the most common was food bank (15 x) and pregnancy care/resource center (13 x). There were also several mentions of services focused on the homeless. Several respondents mentioned the involvement of their people in community organizations or the use of their facilities by community organizations.

An interesting follow up question to explore might be the reasons some Pastors/churches choose greater community involvement, and others less. What theological positions and/or practical issues drive those decisions? A related question could explore the issue of churches cooperating together to address common issues, such as crisis pregnancy. Why are some willing to cross denominational lines to work together while some are not? Is cooperation and collaboration more or less important in the small town context?

### Section 3: Small Town Challenges:

- Questions 21 – 37 capture perspectives on the challenges typically associated with small town life. There were some significant differences between the respondents’ perspectives and other small town research, or even research in the WRC. A few notable examples:
  - *Q25: Our suicide rates are rising* – only 29% agreed or strongly agreed. However, both the recent Curry County Health Needs Assessment and the 2018 Coos County Community Health Assessment note that the suicide rate shows “an alarming upward trend” (see references below). Why the disconnect?
  - *Q26: Underemployment/unemployment is a local issue* – 84% agreed or strongly agreed. Along with Q37, in which 53% of respondents indicated that poverty, the economy, and employment are the biggest challenge in towns along the WRC, this is an area of particular concern. Does the church have a role to play?
  - Responses to Q32, Q33, Q34, Q35 and Q36 all show a more positive perspective on small town life than is typical, indicating that the WRC may be free from at least some of the challenges typical in small towns.
  - *Q37: Biggest challenges* – As noted above issues related to poverty, the economy, and employment were prominent. Also mentioned were drugs and alcohol and health care. Should the local church engage with these issues? Why or why not?

### Section 4: Small Town Church Challenges:

- Questions 38 – 45 capture perspectives on the challenges typically found in small town and rural churches. In every area except one the majority of respondents indicated that their churches did not struggle with common challenges to a significant degree. One notable exception:
  - *Q39: We lack other resources, such as facilities, volunteers, etc.* – 53% agreed or strongly agreed. Since most did not struggle with a lack of finances (Q38), it would be interesting to explore this issue further. What type of resources were lacking? How are other churches dealing with these issues?

### Section 5: The Small Town Church and the Wider Body of Christ

- Questions 46 - 55 are concerned with the Pastor’s perspective on the relationship between small town churches and the broader Body of Christ. Almost all of the questions elicited interesting responses as follows:
  - *Q46: Differences between small town and urban/suburban churches* - Although a consistent trend was difficult to distinguish, it seems a positive difference is that small town churches are more relational, as noted in our **Significant Insights** above. A negative difference is that size is limiting in several ways. How can leaders capitalize on the benefits while taking steps to mitigate the inherent challenges? A worthwhile topic to discuss, and one addressed in the recommended resources.

- *Q48: Is there a renewed interest in the small town church?* – Only 27% agreed or strongly agreed. This researcher would challenge that perception, as the academic paper that preceded this research asked this question and concluded that there was indeed a renewed interest in the small town church and that could be harnessed for the benefit of Pastors and their congregations. See the **Resources & References** section below for more information on that paper as well as information on websites that list resources focused on small town churches.
- *Q49: The effectiveness of an increased emphasis on small town churches* – While most agreed that this would be helpful, there was no consensus on what should be done. There are several comments that suggest a more missional stance toward small town ministry while others mention financial assistance and help with leadership and staff. More conversation on this topic is needed.
- *Q50: The effectiveness of local, relevant conferences* – While not an overwhelming majority, 67% did agree or strongly agree that regional conferences would be helpful. This concept is already being piloted in New England under the banner “Small town Summits,” a model that influenced this researcher in the design of several of the survey questions. Could something similar work along the Wild Rivers Coast? See the link for Small Town Summits in the **Resources & References** section below.
- *Q51: The effectiveness of new regional networks* – A slight majority agreed, while an almost equal number were neutral or responded negatively. This may reflect many Pastors’ experience that local ministerial associations are typically ineffective. Creative and innovative strategies that link like-minded church leaders together may be a more appropriate solution. Further discussion with those who agree could be a good start.
- *Q52: The effectiveness of low cost education and training strategies tailored for small town churches* – 70% agreed or strongly agreed. Village Missions has designed an excellent program to meet this need and it could be a model for others (see link in **Resources & References** below). Church leaders along the WRC may know of other examples that would benefit their fellow Pastors.
- *Q53: The effectiveness of case studies* – With more than 75% of the respondents indicating agreement or strong agreement, this was one of the more surprising results of the survey. In this researcher’s opinion, this could be one of the more beneficial aspects of a new regional network. To see what others are already doing in this area, click on the link for Small Town Jesus in the **Resources & References** section below.
- *Q54: The greatest contribution from the wider Body of Christ* – Prayer was the most common response. How to solicit prayer and how to join with others in raising awareness of small town ministry would be a great topic for a follow-up discussion. Also prominent was a desire for greater appreciation along with help in training and education.
- *Q55: The greatest contribution from the small town church* - As noted in our **Significant Insights** above, a clear theme from respondents was the personal, relational nature of

small town ministry, and how that can serve as an example (and even an admonition) to other churches. Also prominent was tenaciousness, perseverance, and determination, along with prayer and the ability of the small town church to raise up leaders and missionaries.

## Section 6: Information on Participating Churches

- Questions 56 – 66 are designed to gather specific demographics, attendance, and other information about the churches that participated in the survey. Several points are worth mentioning:
  - *Q57: How long have you held this position?* – 53% have been in their position for 10 years or more. This is significantly longer than the 6 year average noted in a 2016 study (see <https://thomrainer.com/2017/03/six-reasons-pastoral-tenure-may-be-increasing/>).
  - *Q58: Average Sunday morning attendance* – Average attendance for the entire list was 124. However, 20 churches, or 69% of those listed, have between 50 and 100 attendees. The average for those churches is 95. If this number is applied to all the churches in our database then the total average Sunday morning attendance on the WRC is 9,500, representing only 7% of the population. Even if very generous numbers are used for the non-Protestant churches it is possible that more than 100,000 people on the WRC are not in church on a Sunday morning, representing a significant outreach and church planting opportunity.

A 2016 study indicated that 46% of American Christians attend a church of 100 or fewer attendees. The majority of churches along the WRC fall into this category. See the study at <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>
  - *Q61 & 62: Demographics* – Respondents indicated that 60% of their congregation were older than 60, predominantly white, and a mix of lower – middle income. A comparison could be made to community demographics to determine if this is comparable to the overall community or if attendees were skewed towards the older members of the community. If so, why?

## Resources & References

### Resources

Back 40 Church Network ([back40.network/](http://back40.network/))

- A relational network of churches with the vision of "Equipping & empowering transformational leaders for the church in rural America."

Rural Home Missionary Association ([rhma.org](http://rhma.org))

- RHMA plants and strengthens churches in small-town America (usually towns of 5,000 or less), typically in the Midwest. Although their site and materials are impacted by their regional focus there are still resources and information applicable to all.

Small Town Big Church Podcast ([jonsanders.org/category/podcast/](http://jonsanders.org/category/podcast/))

- Host Jon Sanders addresses topics of interest to small town church Pastors

Small Town Churches Network (smalltownchurches.org)

- From their website: “Through research, analysis, and the experience of seasoned ministry professionals, we hope to provide tools and encouragement for small town clergy and laity to thrive in their ministries.”

Small Town Jesus (smalltownjesus.com)

- A variety of resources for the small town church Pastor, including conferences led by small town church Pastors and testimonies from others who are ministering in a similar context.

Small Town Summits (smalltownsummits.com)

- A project from the Gospel Coalition New England focused on small towns. In addition to a very helpful resource page they also share information about their regional conferences for small town church Pastors.

The Rural Matters Institute (bgcruralmatters.com)

- A part of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, RMI publishes helpful articles and research and holds an annual conference.

Village Missions (villagemissions.org)

- A ministry focused on small town churches, including several on the Wild Rivers Coast. Helpful and encouraging articles, information on their training program, and testimonies from other small town church Pastors

Vineyard USA, *Multiply Vineyard Small Town USA* (multiplyvineyard.org/category/small-town/)

- Articles and encouragement for small town Pastors from a Vineyard perspective.

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